

way or beware.

— Jim Bradley

I truly believe that it behooves an American administration to take the high road and not allow itself to be caught in an exchange of words with tin-pot dictators. In the end, I'd prefer that decisions be made with cool logic, not overhyped egos.

— John R. Grace

It's refreshing to have a president exhibit strength, unlike Barack Obama, who bent over backwards for other world leaders.

— Stephen Jobson

If Obama were still president, he would threaten Iran by dropping pallets of money on it. Or maybe giving its people U.S. citizenship. Or letting them invade another country, like Iraq or Syria.

— Robert Thompson

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Gaza's Future Is Up To Hamas (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

The low-grade conflict underway between Israel and Hamas since March nearly escalated into a full-scale war over the weekend. After an Israeli soldier was shot and killed near its border with the Gaza Strip, Israeli planes carried out more than 60 airstrikes against Hamas targets. On Monday a cease-fire was barely holding, but none of the issues fueling the fighting had been addressed. The trouble is, barring a radical and unlikely change of direction by Hamas, they probably can't be.

The militant Islamic movement, which has controlled Gaza for more than a decade and fought three previous wars with Israel, wants to break an economic stranglehold on the territory maintained by Israel as well as Egypt and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority. But it has been unwilling to make the concessions necessary for a political agreement with Israel or with its fellow Palestinians. It will neither recognize the Jewish state nor give up its weapons to the new Gaza government it says it favors, headed by the Palestinian Authority.

Instead, Hamas has been trying to force Israel's hand with new forms of asymmetrical warfare. First it organized masses of civilians to march on the border fence, which led more than 130 of them to be killed by Israel's Defense Forces. Then it began launching burning kites and inflated condoms to touch off fires on Israeli territory. That provoked retaliatory airstrikes and threats by the government of Benjamin Netanyahu to initiate a military invasion.

In reality, Mr. Netanyahu will do his best to avoid such an operation, as he has in the past. While Israeli forces could capture the territory and topple the Hamas administration, they would be hard-pressed either to install a new government or to govern the strip themselves. Nor is Israel eager to see an accord between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, since that might lead to an expanded Hamas presence in the West Bank, where an uneasy quiet prevails.

The Trump administration and a U.N. mediator would like to expand humanitarian assistance to Gaza and launch projects to rebuild its economy. They are right to try addressing the misery of the territory's 2 million people, more than half of whom live below the poverty line. But their implicit assumption, that Hamas will observe a long-term cease-fire in exchange for economic aid, is flawed: The group has been choosing war with Israel over development for years.

The "Hamas leadership is holding the Palestinians of Gaza captive," a trio of Trump aides wrote in The Post last week. They are right, but there is no easy way to alter that status quo. For now, the best available course is to encourage Israel to counter the group's provocations with minimal force. Flaming kites are not a strategic threat and should not be treated as such. If Hamas fails either to obtain a lifting of the economic blockade or to provoke Israel into creating more Palestinian victims, the pressure for it to change will grow.

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Athens And Moscow's Stunning Falling-Out (Konstandaras, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Nikos Konstandaras

For centuries, even when Athens was a bastion of the West during the Cold War, Greece and Russia have seen themselves as natural allies. Both are Christian Orthodox nations on Islam's western frontiers; even as a NATO member, Greece tried to maintain

channels of communication with the Soviet Union. Yet a sudden dispute over alleged Russian meddling in Greek affairs has escalated rapidly. This could have long-term consequences for Greek-Russian ties and for the Western Balkans.

This month, Athens informed Moscow that it was expelling two Russian diplomats and refusing entry to two others. Among the accusations: the four were trying to stoke opposition to a recent agreement signed by Greece and a northern neighbor, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, ending a 27-year dispute over the latter's name.

Ratification by both countries would open the way for a renamed the Republic of North Macedonia to join NATO and the European Union. Greek opponents of the deal object to their neighbors' use of "Macedonia" in any form, saying this implies claims on the Greek province of the same name; Macedonian nationalists object to adding a qualifier to their country's name.

It is easy to see how Russia, which is opposed to Macedonia joining NATO, could be tempted to exploit this volatile mix to encourage hard-liners on both sides. Macedonia's prime minister, Zoran Zaev, claimed in an interview with BuzzFeed News that Greek businessmen "sympathetic to the Russian cause" paid large sums of money to foes of the deal in his country to commit acts of violence before a referendum on the agreement is held.

The Russian foreign ministry issued a stern protest to the Greek ambassador over the expulsions and has threatened to respond further. On July 18, a ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, declared that Greece was acting under pressure from its allies and warned that "such actions do not remain without consequences."

The Greek government reacted angrily. The foreign ministry in Athens declared these statements "a characteristic example of disrespect for a third country and a lack of understanding of today's world, in which states, regardless of their size, are independent and can exercise an independent, multidimensional and democratic foreign policy." It added, "In any case, the Russian authorities themselves are very well aware of what their people do."

A few days earlier, a State Department spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, tweeted: "We support Greece defending its sovereignty. Russia must end its destabilizing behavior." In Moscow's view, this alignment between Athens and Washington confirmed its suspicions of collusion.

Until now, Russian officials had been full of praise for Greece. In 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov noted Greece's opposition to sanctions against Russia. "We appreciate the stance of the Greek government, which understands the complete counterproductivity of attempts to speak this language with Russia," he said after a meeting in Moscow with his Greek counterpart, Nikos Kotzias. Last Friday, the Russian Ambassador in Athens, Andrey Maslov, tweeted: "The past years were a time of an unprecedented boom in Russian-Greek relations." But, he added, "The actions of the Greek side ... have become a disappointment for us."

The Greek move was unexpected. Not only has Athens always been careful in its dealings with Moscow, but this sudden rupture was executed by what is considered to be the most pro-Russian government Greece has had — a government that in March refused to join its Western allies in expelling Russian diplomats in retaliation for Moscow's alleged involvement in the poisoning of a former Russian double agent and his daughter in Britain.

The coalition government is dominated by the radical-left Syriza party, which opposed international sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Its leader, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, visited Moscow for support in 2015, while threatening the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and other creditors that Greece would walk away from its bailout commitments.

The junior coalition partner, Independent Greeks, is a hard-right nationalist party. Its leader, Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, while an outspoken supporter of Moscow, has also worked closely with United States military officials; his political contortions include denouncing the Macedonia deal while remaining in the government.

The United States has been Greece's major ally since 1947, when Washington stepped to help a right-wing government defeat Communist forces in a civil war in 1946-49. In the years after, the Greek left opposed the United States while supporting closer ties with the Soviet Union. Russia is now, by default, the antithesis to the "imperialist alliance," as Greece's small but unbending Communist Party calls the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Communists, echoing Russian officials, saw the expulsions as Mr. Tsipras's "gift" to NATO, timed to coincide with the recent NATO summit.

Support for Russia's positions goes beyond any effort to embarrass the government or oppose the Macedonia deal. President Vladimir Putin enjoys broad support among Greeks, more than in any other European country. Greece (along with Vietnam, the Philippines and Tanzania) was one of only four countries among 37 surveyed by the Pew Research Center last year in which Mr. Putin got more than 50 percent approval for his international performance.

This could be because he projects the image of a powerful leader who is proud of his Eastern Orthodox heritage, visiting the monastic community of Mount Athos in northern Greece and playing on deep-rooted feelings in his own country and here. During

the nearly four centuries of subjugation to Ottoman rule, Greeks yearned for liberation and many saw Russia as their salvation. Although these expectations were usually disappointed, Russia has often played a crucial role in Greek history.

Major milestones included a 1774 treaty under which Russia assumed the right to protect all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. This allowed Greek merchants and shipowners to fly the Russian flag, thus escaping Ottoman taxes and expanding their wealth and influence. In 1821, when the Greek War of Independence broke out, the Greek Orthodox patriarch was hanged by the Turks and his body thrown into the Bosphorus; when it resurfaced unexpectedly, Greeks took it to Russia, to the city of Odessa, where it was afforded a grand funeral in the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1827, a combined British, French and Russian fleet destroyed an Ottoman-Egyptian fleet at Navarino, leading to the declaration of an independent Greece after years of struggle.

More recently, the relationship has been more complicated — with Soviet support and then abandonment of Communist forces in the civil war, with Russia's intricate economic and political relationship with Cyprus, with the current marriage of convenience between Moscow and Ankara. There is also a strong ethnic-religious current that influences politics in both Greece and Russia.

The question now is, what prompted a Greek government with pro-Moscow sympathies to take such drastic action? Was it because of fears of violence over the Macedonia issue, as suggested by the claims of Mr. Zaev, the Macedonian prime minister? Was it because foreign meddling with the fires of nationalism in Greece could harm the government's prospects in elections that must be held by autumn 2019? Were the expulsions a way of declaring allegiance to the United States?

In any case, this unexpected turn of events could lead — despite Athens's protestations to the contrary — to a re-evaluation of Greece's relations with Russia. The result could be Athens playing a more prominent role in stabilizing the western Balkans, and aligning itself more fully with European Union policies rather than deferring to Russia's concerns and interests.

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Putin Is Weak. Europe Doesn't Have To Be (Mead, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Walter Russell Mead

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Trump's Rude He-Man Act Is Catnip To His Fans. They Don't Care That He's Putty For Putin (Henneberger, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Melinda Henneberger

Those of us unenchanted by President Donald Trump will never see what those thrilled by him see. But one thing that the thrilled routinely bring up is how deeply satisfying they find his willingness to say what others won't and do what others wouldn't. Unfortunately, I don't notice many of us holding much back these days. But in the paean of Missouri grandma Deborah Bolding, Trump "doesn't take anybody's crap."

He's the FU president, and the pleasure of watching him excoriate Canadians and embarrass 92-year-old Queen Elizabeth apparently excuses even his dead-on impersonation of a Russian asset. His born-in-a-barn rudeness and he-man assaults on the most vulnerable? That's being real and finally showing the elites and the rest of the world who's in charge.

Which is why in the Missouri town where the country's largest nail company is "on the brink of extinction" as a direct result of Trump's steel tariff, supporters told me again and again that they are willing to suffer economic hardship in return for the completely unguilty pleasure of watching him stick it to the Chinese — and, by the way, to undocumented immigrants. What's so studly about buttering up bullies?

Even one of the two Democrats and the only African-American among the dozens of people I interviewed in Poplar Bluff volunteered that he likes that Trump is playing the boss and won't ever back down.

Except, apparently, to Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, whom Trump — to the unhappy surprise of his team — just invited to the White House this fall for Helsinki, the sequel.

We who were absent the day they passed out the glasses that make Trump's insecurity look like strength wonder what's so studly about standing up to true friends while buttering up the real bullies.

For a minute after the Helsinki summit, it was still possible to ask whether the FU president had finally gone too far in taking Putin's word that he didn't attack our election, instead of believing his own FBI and his own country. We are his country, right? Would the former national security party really shrug off Trump's televised deference to a thug? After some mild remonstrations, that's exactly what happened.

Former presidential nominees John McCain, at home in Arizona with brain cancer, and Mitt Romney, running for the U.S. Senate from Trump-immune Utah, were among the rare Republicans who had the fortitude to do what the president's fans say they love about him: They told the plain truth, while many a congressional Republican squeaked that while Trump might have expressed himself more clearly, the only real problem was the unflattering and unfair coverage of the confab.

Trump was perfectly clear and said what he always says about Putin and Russian interference. Then his fellow Republicans said what they always do, too, and defended him.

"I think anyone who watched the press conference, including the president himself, would say it wasn't his finest hour," said Rep. Warren Davidson, an Ohio Republican. Then he and his colleagues did nothing. Nothing, that is, but pretend to accept at face value the president's explanation that he had really said the opposite of what he intended to say in Helsinki.

Sure, because when Trump said he wouldn't know why Russians would have interfered in our election, as per our entire intelligence community, what he meant to say is that he wouldn't know why they wouldn't have.

Likewise, when he was asked whether he thought Russians were still trying to interfere in this year's elections, he said, "No." But according to his press secretary, he really meant only that no, he wasn't going to answer or take any more questions.

Maybe later he'll say that when he says he'll think about the interesting question of whether to turn over former U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul to Russian agents for interrogation and who knows what else, he really meant, "Hell. No."

Even the Senate in its stupor voted 98-0 that that wasn't going to happen.

Republicans must pray every night that when the reason for Trump's consistent pro-Putin bias finally comes out, they don't go down in history as the cowards who let Sen. McCain speak the truth from his sick bed — the truth they couldn't choke out from the halls of Congress.

Meanwhile, I think anyone with eyes to see must agree that it's not their finest hour.

Melinda Henneberger is an editorial writer and a columnist for The Kansas City Star.

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I Was Born Stateless And Persecuted In Myanmar. Here Is What It Took For Me To Come To The U.S. (Mohammed, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Imran Mohammed

I arrived in Chicago this spring, one of a handful of refugees sent to the United States under an agreement with Australia. I'm enjoying my freedom here and looking forward to the chance to get an education and a job and, at last, to lead a normal life after years spent looking for a country to call my own.

My journey here has been a long one.

I was born in 1994, in Myanmar, to Rohingya parents. Although Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations, the government refuses to recognize us as one of the eight "national indigenous races" and we face constant persecution as stateless people.

When I was 16, I left Myanmar by boat, passing through Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea. I was detained in Indonesia for 17 months and on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island for almost five years by the Australian government.

In 2013, Australia proclaimed that any asylum-seekers arriving by boat would never enter its country. Since then, it has sent thousands to Manus Island and the island nation of Nauru. The government said it was trying to prevent more dangerous boat crossings and drownings at sea.

It trapped people like me on land, consigning us to prison-like camps.

On Manus Island, every day was filled with trauma. We were treated like animals by the security guards and some of us were beaten by local people, but no action was taken. We did not receive proper medical attention. We had to beg for the privilege of a

phone call.

We were treated like animals by the security guards and some of us were beaten by local people, but no action was taken.

One day I made a request to call my uncle, who was ill and near death. My case worker went to her boss and he went to his boss for permission. It took two days, and by that time, my uncle had passed away.

All the while, the Australian government threatened forcible deportation, indefinite incarceration and resettlement in Papua New Guinea, where we are not wanted. Our hopes would rise when caring people fought for us in protests and in legal proceedings, and crash when international attention drifted to some other problem in some other place.

We spent our time worrying about our survival, safety and our loved ones whom we had left behind. We lost interest in improving our lives, because we couldn't see any future. Depression, boredom and fear affected us day and night, and all this continues for those who are still held captive.

For years, Australia has looked for places to send the people it has trapped on these islands. The United States agreed in 2016 to take around 1,250 refugees, and I was one of the lucky ones.

The process began on March 3, 2017, when an officer from the International Rescue Committee's Resettlement Support Center interviewed me. My biometric information was collected a month later. I was then scheduled for another interview, in August, this time with officers from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In September, I was called for a mandatory medical examination and U.S. health screening. My refugee application was finally accepted in December.

Also in 2017, while my fortunes were taking a turn for the better, my family had to flee Myanmar due to a brutal military assault on the Rohingya people and now have no clue what the future will bring.

In Chicago, I think of them, and I think of my friends left behind on Manus Island. They live in centers dotted around the town of Lorengau without any assurance of safety and increasingly restricted in their movements. A new curfew means they can't leave the campgrounds from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

I am happy to be in the United States, hopeful and motivated for the future. I want to study and work so that I can create something wonderful out of this gift of freedom. I am grateful that the Trump administration honored the agreement reached previously with the Australian government, to accept selected men, women and children from Manus and Nauru. But many people, many of my people, have been left behind.

Imran Mohammed is a stateless refugee from Myanmar living in the United States.

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The U.S. Makes A New Push To Bolster Taiwan's Military Defenses. China Won't Like It (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

The State Department's recently reported request for Marines to return to Taiwan for the first time since 1979 to defend the de facto U.S. embassy there is not an isolated event. Instead, it underscores what appears to be newfound willingness within the U.S. government and Congress to challenge China and pay more attention to Taiwan's defense.

For several decades, Washington followed a policy that shied away from irritating China when it came to Taiwan. As the island of 23 million evolved into one of Asia's most vibrant democracies, with a boisterously free press, successive American administrations were careful not to provoke Beijing even as they tried to shelter Taiwan diplomatically and provide for the territory's defense.

An influential report written in 2008 by a retired U.S. naval commander was embraced by officials from the Obama administration because it argued that the United States no longer needed to sell Taiwan big-ticket items, such as fighter jets, or support its submarine program, which would anger Beijing. Instead, the author, William Murray, contended that Taiwan could forgo an air force and a big navy and focus instead on making itself a "porcupine" by adding smaller weapons systems and mobile infantry units that could defend Taiwan's beaches from an all-out Chinese assault. The logic, in the words of Thomas X. Hammes, a former Marine Corps colonel now at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, was that "a grizzly bear can eat a porcupine anytime it wants to, but it just isn't worth the pain."

However, intensifying Chinese pressure on Taiwan, a growing disenchantment with China within the ranks of the U.S. government and Congress, and the rise to prominence of Taiwan's friends within the Trump administration have presaged a move away from the "porcupine" strategy toward one more willing to confront Beijing. This trend could continue further if President Trump, always unpredictable, lets his advisers on the National Security Council and Defense Department have their way.

Starting earlier this year, China's air force fighters and bombers began circling Taiwan, forcing Taiwan's air force to scramble its jets. In late April, China's state-run television released footage of People's Liberation Army forces invading a mock Taiwanese village. And late last month, Chinese naval forces had a drill in the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, on the diplomatic front, the Dominican Republic became the third country in less than two years to sever official ties with Taiwan to favor China. Now, because of Beijing's accelerating campaign to diplomatically isolate Taipei, only 19 countries recognize Taiwan.

China's tactics have alienated many members of a younger generation of State Department officials who used to be considered the strongest proponents of smooth relations with Beijing. Exasperation with China has bled into Congress, which has adopted its most activist position on Taiwan since 1979, when Congress defied the administration of then-President Jimmy Carter to pass the Taiwan Relations Act, mandating that the U.S. government help in Taiwan's defense.

In February, the House and Senate unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which called on the Trump administration to send high-ranking U.S. officials to liaise with Taiwan's government. Both in the Pentagon and on the National Security Council, Trump administration officials are far more sympathetic to Taiwan's challenges than their counterparts have been in the past. They have given the U.S. Navy more leeway to challenge China in the Pacific. Earlier this month, the Navy dispatched two destroyers through the Taiwan Strait for the first time since 2017.

In April, the State Department approved a plan to allow U.S. defense companies to explore selling Taiwan technology and weapons systems for its submarine program. The decision marked the first sign of life in an endeavor that last received U.S. support in 2001 when President George W. Bush announced a U.S. program to help Taiwan purchase eight diesel submarines.

It's still a long shot whether Taiwan is going to be able to cobble together a new submarine, but this move marks a major break with the Obama administration, which had essentially shelved the deal. In another shift, there's also talk now among experts and industry sources that the U.S. government is seriously considering selling Taiwan jet fighters for the first time since 1992. Senior Republicans in the Senate have called on the Trump administration to sell Taiwan the F-35. Others have argued for an upgraded version of the F-16, which since the sale in 1992 has served as the backbone of Taiwan's air force.

The Trump administration is also pushing Taiwan's government, led by President Tsai Ing-wen, to substantially increase its defense spending. American officials have said that ideally Taiwan should double its defense outlays. Taiwan currently devotes less than 2 percent of its gross domestic product to defense.

Some experts, such as Ian Easton, the author of "The Chinese Invasion Threat" and a research fellow at Project 2049 Institute, think that this shift in U.S. policy is overdue and that the United States needs to support both big-ticket items such as fighters for an air force, as well as armed drones, smart mines and other weapons that were part of the porcupine strategy, too.

"There are certain capabilities that no other country can provide Taiwan," he said. "If we don't, no one will."

The wild card in this equation is Trump. Will Trump sell Taiwan down the river in order to make a deal with China over trade or North Korea, or will he listen to the advice from Congress and give Taiwan the help it needs?

Of course, if Trump increases American support of the sole democratic Chinese territory in the world, China will be furious. When reports emerged that the State Department had requested Marines to protect the American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto American embassy on the island, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman urged the Trump administration to "exercise caution." Should the United States start selling Taiwan jet fighters again, the reaction from Beijing will be substantially worse.

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Young Pakistan Is Ready To 'Just Do It.' Whatever 'It' Is (Hanif, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Mohammed Hanif

Imran Khan, Pakistan's prime minister in waiting, hates being a loser. He has said, "As a sportsman I know winning & losing are part of the game," but that was after coming out of retirement to win the Cricket World Cup in 1992. And losing doesn't seem to be part of his idea of the political game.

Yet for a very long time Khan was a loser — that other kind of loser, the one you still hear in President Trump's Twitter voice. For much of two decades, while pledging to bring about a revolution and saying things like "when I become prime minister," he prowled the margins of Pakistani politics. A darling of English tabloids, his rallies back home weren't attracting much of a crowd.

But over the last five years, after Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (P.T.I.), lost the 2013 election to Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N, Khan has become the main contender to power. Weeks before the general election on July 25, even Khan's

opponents were calling him ladla, the favorite. Sharif, who was removed from his post as prime minister last year over corruption charges, has just been sentenced to prison. Other candidates have been hounded by the police or the courts or are being killed by the Taliban or the Islamic State.

People who used to laugh at Khan's ambition have been falling over one another to get on the P.T.I. ticket — or, failing that, to take selfies with him. There's even an app that generates those.

Khan is fond of using sporting metaphors to convey his message. When his opponents are called out on something, he says that an "umpire's finger" has been raised — and when one of them joins his party, TV headlines scream, "another wicket falls." Most of Khan's young followers have only seen him play cricket on YouTube, but they seem inspired by his vision of a new Pakistan, a Pakistan free of corruption, a Pakistan that is respected on the world stage. Just like he was as a star athlete.

When Khan started out in politics, it was like he was throwing a party for a young Pakistan. About 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30, so he has brought music to political rallies. Today, even conservative party leaders who once wouldn't be seen near a guitar are hiring DJs to play music during their speeches.

Khan has also brought into the fold the very politicians who for years called him a loser. He has surrounded himself with land grabbers, feudal lords and rent seekers. He justifies surrounding himself with "electables" — people with dedicated vote banks — because they "know the science of winning elections." Many of the candidates on P.T.I.'s lineup for the election are professional politicians who have been party-hopping for generations.

Khan has finally become a traditional politician — and in the process he might be taking the country's youth back in time.

In one of his first protest rallies during what had been a very hot summer, some of his supporters clashed with police. One of them was caught on camera saying, if the police beats us up how will the revolution happen? He went on to add, famously, "we are wasting away in this heat."

The complaint about being hot was silly but important for coming from a new kind of voice: from someone who absolutely didn't expect to be beaten up by the police. But Khan's young warriors do cheer when the police beat up other protesters or the army abducts its detractors and makes them disappear. Khan's critics call them "youthias" — a riff on chutiya, slang for a jerk.

Social media accounts with Khan's picture and his party's flag are full of staggering misogyny. (His followers seem to take after him.) Many of them claim to be super patriots. Some say that Malala Yousafzai's shooting in 2012 was staged and that India is sponsoring terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Khan's new Pakistan was going to be a bit like Sweden and a bit like Singapore — or, really, like old Medina: According to him, all welfare state models are borrowed from early Islamic empires. He supports the blasphemy law and has defended the justice system adopted by the Taliban from Pashtun tribes.

Khan's opponents often chide him for his marriages and affairs, his character flaws, his spiritual confusion. But these things have rarely done harm to a male politician in the past. And Khan seems to think that he has enough electables behind him. That the Taliban listen to him even though they are reported to have threatened him. That he can knock down a corrupt system with the help of the politicians who built it.

Now, he just needs to keep the army on board.

Democracy was restored in 2008 after nearly a decade of Gen. Pervez Musharraf in power. But the decade since has shown that this model isn't working. Missing persons' cases are increasing. The media are censored at levels not seen even under dictatorship. And the Pakistani army would like to run the country the way it used to: It's fine for elected politicians to cut ribbons at inaugurations but not for them to decide foreign policy or internal security.

But can Khan take on the military establishment, which still sits at the top of the food chain and is still fighting an eternal war against India and its own people, too? His opponents describe his supporters as "boot polishia," those who lick the army's boots. If Khan comes to power, like all prime ministers before him, he will try to wriggle out from under those boots. And that's not likely to end well.

Khan seems to have walked out of a self-help book or a sports ad, but after an epic journey, he is finally knocking at the gates of power, ready to "Just do it" — whatever "it" is. Khan has politicized a whole generation, only to deliver it into servitude to Pakistan's old establishment.

Mohammed Hanif (@mohammedhanif) is the author of the novels "A Case of Exploding Mangoes" and "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti," and the librettist for the opera "Bhutto."

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Zero Tariffs? There's A Precedent (Lane, WSJ)

If Trump is serious about free and fair trade, he should follow the example of Caterpillar in 1988.

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Bill Lane

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Trump's Foreign Policy Is Perfectly Coherent (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

President Trump's foreign policy is perfectly coherent — so coherent, in fact, that we could give it a name: pure bilateralism.

Trump's foreign policy doctrine has been staring us in the face so plainly that we've overlooked it. Here's my unifying theory: He didn't get out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal because he disagreed with this or that detail of the agreements. He hasn't started up deals with Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin and sought to force Xi Jinping to the bargaining table because he has refined views of what he seeks. He got out of the former deals because they were multilateral; he's working on the latter deals because they are bilateral.

In an interview with CNBC last week, Trump said: "I'm different than other [presidents]. I'm a dealmaker. I've made deals all my life. I do really well. I make great deals."

We've heard that dealmaker language plenty, but we haven't fully registered its content.

Less than seeking to disrupt the old order because he has a considered view about it, apparently Trump seeks a global order that turns around him personally, where global politics is conducted as a series of deals with Donald Trump.

Tony Abbott, former prime minister of Australia, almost saw to the bottom of things in a recent speech published in the Wall Street Journal. Abbott wrote, "What Mr. Trump is making clear . . . is what should always have been screamingly obvious: that each nation's safety now rests in its own hands far more than in anyone else's." Such a view forces a pivot from cooperative multilateralism to pure bilateralism.

Abbott didn't explicitly point out this doctrine of bilateralism but seems to have intuited it. He focused considerable attention on what sort of bilateral relationship Australia should undertake with the United States. Abbott wrote: "Being America's partner, as well as its friend, is even more important now, given Mr. Trump's obsession with reciprocity."

Then Abbott made a mistake, proposing what we might think of as the Michael Cohen doctrine of foreign policy: total loyalty. "In my judgment, Australia should have upgraded its Iraq mission to 'advise, assist and accompany' as soon as America did, and extended it into Syria. Australia should have mounted freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea. And Australia should have not only welcomed the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem but moved ours, too." Cohen's current troubles tell where such total loyalty leads.

Across his business career, Trump sought to use his assets to consolidate his personal power and influence through dealmaking. He rode even the bankruptcy of his casinos into financial advantage and from their ruins drew resources that helped him redefine his development business and add to it a television career.

The important thing to recognize about Trump's foreign policy agenda — his sequential, bilateral dealmaking — is that we, the American people, with our mammoth consumer market, are now his most valuable asset. Other countries want access to us; this is the ace in Trump's hand. Like his erstwhile casinos, we're a stake he can put on the dealmaking table.

Recognizing this helps make sense of how his domestic policy and foreign policy align. He cuts taxes at home; the economy revs up. Voilà, the world's biggest market is even hotter, and now he can brandish the asset in trade fights to maximal effect. Many have tried to tease out why Trump should follow up his tax cuts, meant to help small businesses, with tariffs that punish many of those same people. That problem disappears when one recognizes that Trump cares about his asset — "the American people" — in a similar way to how he cared about his casinos.

He himself said this, in less coherent language, in his CNBC interview. Given "all this work that we are putting in to the economy," he asserted, the economy is "maybe as good as it's ever been ever." As a result, he said, in reference to his tariffs, "This is the time." He continued, "You know the expression 'We're playing with the bank's money,' right?"

The purpose of Trump's bilateralist foreign policy is not some overarching vision about world peace or democracy's role in global order. The purpose is simply to maximize Trump's personal power, to make him personally great, by proving his dealmaking prowess and making himself necessary to the world's economy. I think that he himself believes that when he is great on his own terms, America is great. That, with him in the White House, his interest is the national interest.

But what about for us? Is pure bilateralism good for the American people? Is Trump's interest the same as the national interest? A thousand times no. A democratic republic cannot afford to become dependent on the bilateral relationships a single individual has with the other countries of the world. We need to secure and preserve institutional relationships, both multilateral and bilateral, that we the people can control and steer over time through temporary representatives.

Trump is not merely disrupting NATO and other multilateral relationships. He is disrupting the institutional power, durability and sovereignty of the American people.

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STATE DEPARTMENT

An AR-15 Made At Home? With 3D Printing, 'The Downloadable Gun' Becomes Available August 1 (Hafner, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Josh Hafner

Americans will soon be able to make 3D-printed guns from their home, widening the door to do-it-yourself versions of firearms including the AR-15 — the gun of choice in American mass shootings — that are untraceable with no background check required.

A settlement earlier this year between the State Department and Texas-based Defense Distributed will let the nonprofit release blueprints for guns online starting Aug. 1, a development hailed by the group as the death of gun control in the United States.

"The age of the downloadable gun begins," Defense Distributed stated on its site. Its founder, Cody Wilson, tweeted a photograph of a grave marked "American gun control."

The plans freely available next month put firearms clicks away from anyone with the right machine and materials. That reality has startled gun control advocates, who say it makes untraceable firearms all the more available.

For Wilson, August marks the end of a years-long legal battle: He designed a 3D-printable plastic pistol, the "Liberator .380," in 2012 and put the plans online. It was downloaded more than 100,000 times before federal officials blocked his site, citing international export law.

A lawsuit from Wilson followed. The State Department settled in June.

The Second Amendment Foundation, a nonprofit that partnered with Wilson in the lawsuit, put out a statement calling the settlement "a devastating blow to the gun prohibition lobby."

Assembling guns at home isn't new. It can be done legally, too, provided the made-at-home gun isn't sold. Defense Distributed already sells parts that let users build their own untraceable firearms, known as "ghost guns" for their lack of serial numbers.

"Legally manufacture unserialized rifles and pistols in the comfort and privacy of home," one product's description states.

David Chipman, who worked 25 years as an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, told Vice News that the homemade guns favored by hobbyists have since become popular with criminals.

"Now, criminals have started using ghost guns as a way to circumvent assault weapon regulations," said Chipman, now an adviser to the gun control advocacy group Giffords. "I imagine that people will also start printing guns to get around laws."

Gun plans previewed on Defense Distributed's website feature the Liberator pistol along with an AR-15 and a VZ-58, a Czechoslovakian assault rifle.

The printers needed to make the guns can cost from \$5,000 to \$600,000, according to Vice News. The quality of plastic matters, too: An early design printed by federal agents shattered after one shot. A second gun, made from a higher grade resin, stayed intact.

William Bones, the chief of police in Boise, Idaho, told the Idaho Statesman that law enforcement agencies have followed developments in 3D-printed guns for "quite a while now."

"Measures are needed to ensure these weapons are safely built and to prevent access by children or those prohibited from owning a firearm," Bones told the newspaper.

"Hopefully we see some safe and responsible legislation soon as well as manufacturers taking measure to prevent access which might lead to tragedy."

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TRADE

EU Counts On Top Official To Try To Calm U.S. Trade Fight (Pop, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Valentina Pop

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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World Media Wrestles With Broader Impact Of Escalating U.S.-China Trade War (Boylan, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dan Boylan

The escalating trade war between the U.S. and China continues stirring deep sentiments across the globe, including claims from Chinese media that Beijing has intentionally greeted Washington's latest threat of more tariffs — with silence.

On Monday and over the weekend, editorialists and columnists wrestled with the broader geopolitical impact to the possibility that President Donald Trump alters China's bullish trade practices at the expense of his political base.

In the Middle East, Al Jazeera's leading opinion on the fast-moving issue is headlined, "Will Trump's tariffs push the EU [European Union] and China closer together?"

J. Berkshire Miller, a fellow on East Asia for the EastWest Institute, notes that last week, while Mr. Trump met with Russian President Vladimir Putin — key EU and Chinese officials gathered for a two-day summit in Beijing.

There, they pledged to deepen their relationship "against the backdrop of increasing uncertainty in their relationship with the United States."

Mr. Miller, however, concludes that while the Trump administration's approach to trade has been abrasive, the EU remains deeply wary of Chinese trade policy and practices and "is far from making a decision on elevating disagreements with Washington into something larger or overtly siding with Beijing in a united bloc to oppose the moves."

From Canada, Toronto Star columnist Heather Mallick writes on Monday that "Trump tariffs are a ticking bomb for numbed Americans" and delves in what she sees as a dangerous game that the White House is playing with the economics of Mr. Trump's working-class political base.

Earlier this month Trump administration trade representatives announced plans to target a possible \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods with tariffs — just days after Beijing and Washington levied tit-for-tat tariffs of \$34 billion on each other's goods. More recently, Mr. Trump has said more than \$500 billion — or almost the entire value of Chinese goods shipped to America last year — could be targeted in the near future.

Mr. Trump has long demanded that China reform its hard-line trade negotiating tactics and curtail the theft of American technology and intellectual property.

Ms. Mallick explores a more grass-roots angle, contending that U.S.-China trade has allowed Americans "to shop cheaply at Walmart and buy in bulk at Costco" adding that both are "clogged" with Chinese goods.

"If tariffs damaged this system, Americans would march on Washington, D.C. with hammers," Mr. Mallick writes. "No, those come from China. Make that assault rifles."

Over the weekend, the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English language paper, headlined its lead opinion, "Why is Beijing unusually muted since Donald Trump's latest US\$500 billion trade war threat?"

Writer Sidney Leng notes that the Chinese state media, “from the official Xinhua news agency to Global Times” did not cover Mr. Trump’s latest threat. He adds that over the weekend, neither the Chinese Commerce Ministry nor the Foreign Ministry issued any statements on the subject.

“The silence in Beijing is unusual,” he writes, “but comes after Chinese media were told not to “over-report” the trade war, to avoid spreading panic.”

Mr. Leng also suggests that Beijing might simply have “nothing to add to its previous statements” which have argued that “a trade war is bad for everyone”.

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Tariffs Trim A Factory’s Profit, But Loyalty To Trump Endures (Schwartz, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Nelson D. Schwartz

You might think that managers and workers at Banner Metals would be up in arms over the Trump administration’s trade policies. After all, tariffs on imported steel and aluminum have pushed raw-material prices up and margins down, forcing the company to delay plans to purchase a new \$1 million cutting machine and hire two new employees to operate it.

But the reaction at the plant is based on more than self-interest. “I’m not looking at what’s best for Banner right now,” said Bronson Jones, a part-owner of the company and its chief executive. “I’m looking at what’s best for the national economy. The U.S. has been taken advantage of for too long.”

That proposition, tracing a volatile political fault line, is frequently encountered on the factory floor here, a few miles from this prosperous city’s gleaming downtown.

Casey Jackson, a maintenance technician, said he would support the tariffs even if they cost him personally. “If it comes out of my paycheck, so be it,” he said. “You got to look at the big picture. That tiny bit of sacrifice we make will create jobs.”

While the manufacturing sector is on the upswing nationally — factories have added 344,000 jobs since the beginning of 2017 — there is an abiding sense of siege among factory workers and executives alike, of having been shortchanged in the trade equation.

Mr. Trump, in departing from the traditional Republican embrace of free trade, struck a chord in 2016, carrying this battleground state by eight percentage points. And the workers on the factory floor underscore his reservoir of blue-collar support — even as he pursues a trade conflict in which key American industrial sectors could be hit. For them, there is still a larger wrong that must be righted.

Divisions on the issue remain stark. In a poll conducted by SurveyMonkey for The New York Times in early July, 76 percent of Republicans supported the metal tariffs, while 79 percent of Democrats opposed them. Nearly half of workers with a high school diploma or some college said they approved of the tariffs, compared with 39 percent of college-educated workers.

As Mr. Jackson, a 34-year-old Air Force veteran, sees it, the current trade war recalls past military conflicts. “We had victory gardens in World War II,” he said during a break between shifts, which run from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and then from 4:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. “I know the tariffs have an impact on us, but I don’t think it was a mistake.”

Besides the 20 to 25 percent increase in raw material prices in recent months, Mr. Jones has found himself scrambling to line up shipments of the steel and aluminum that Banner’s two-story-tall stamping machines turn into parts for aircraft brakes and seats. Bigger manufacturers have been hoarding metal supplies, he said, ordering larger amounts to get ahead of rising prices and leaving smaller firms like Banner at a disadvantage.

“We were accustomed to four weeks’ lead time, but now it can be as long as 16 to 20 weeks,” he said. In response, Banner has been flying in steel from an Austrian supplier, an expensive proposition when the price of airfreight and the new tariffs are taken into account.

With about 70 percent of Banner’s business coming from the aerospace industry, Mr. Jones can’t easily switch metal suppliers. Anything going into an airplane has to be carefully certified beforehand, restricting Banner’s options when raw material is delayed.

“With aerospace, you can’t pick up and move it,” Mr. Jones said.

Mr. Jones had planned to buy a laser cutting apparatus that would be able to do some production currently outsourced, but pressure on profit margins forced him to postpone the order in May. He even visited the manufacturer while the machine was under construction and had a spot picked out for it at the plant.

"It was like going to see your new car in the showroom," he said. "But with steel prices up, we could see the writing on the wall." Nevertheless, while Mr. Jones isn't always comfortable with what the president may say or put on Twitter, he likes the overall strategy.

"He's going for the jugular, which is typical Trump style," he said. "I'm not used to it, and it's not a presidential style we are accustomed to. But he's the only president who's taken a significant stance on trade, and we need a brash approach."

The scope of the trade tensions has been widening — 25 percent tariffs on imported steel went into effect this spring, and the White House imposed duties on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of Chinese imports this month. The Commerce Department has also been examining whether imports of foreign cars pose a national security threat, a prelude to protectionist steps in the auto industry.

The steel tariffs have resulted in the creation of some new jobs. After going cold in 2015, for example, the blast furnaces are restarting at U.S. Steel's plant in Granite City, Ill., in large part because of higher prices for the tubular steel churned out there.

But a vast majority of economists argue that over all, tariffs cost more jobs than they create. And there are many more metal consumers out there, like Banner, than metal producers like U.S. Steel.

Despite the perception of an uneven playing field in trade, Banner has been thriving.

Founded in 1921 as a tool-and-die producer, the company has added eight workers in the last couple of years, bringing its work force to 38. Demand from customers like Boeing, Airbus and United Technologies has been strong.

"We do parts for everything that flies," said Rick Sayre, Banner's vice president for engineering. "It's been a good run."

Even though manufacturing accounts for only 8.5 percent of the nation's work force, compared with 15 percent a quarter-century ago, it continues to offer opportunity at plants like Banner's.

Machine operators earn \$15 to \$20 an hour, and experienced tool-and-die makers can earn twice that. There are also avenues for advancement — Mr. Jones himself started in the shipping department at Banner 24 years ago, earning \$8 an hour as a quality-assurance inspector. He eventually rose into management and bought the company with two partners in 2013.

"We believe in promoting from within, and we encourage people to go back to college," he said. In some cases, Banner will pay for additional training for employees.

Even as the talk of a trade war has intensified, and new duties go into effect, Mr. Jones said he saw the Trump administration's moves as part of a negotiating strategy, not a fundamental move away from free trade, which he said he supported.

"I don't think hundreds of billions in tariffs are going into effect with other countries, but it sure gets their attention," he said. "I don't think it will all stick, and they'll meet in the middle. It's short-term pain for long-term gain."

The results of the survey for The Times echoed Mr. Jones's analysis. Among Americans who said they approved of the tariffs, a third said they thought Mr. Trump's approach to trade would be "helpful in the long term but harmful in the short term."

Mr. Sayre concurred — with one caveat. "I never cared much for the way Trump does it, but he's doing O.K. as far as I'm concerned," he said. What exactly doesn't he like? "The way he bullies everybody and bends the truth," Mr. Sayre said.

Back on the factory floor, Mr. Jackson said he was comfortable with the president's game plan. "It's aggressive, it's tough, and he won't back down," Mr. Jackson said. "Using trade as a bargaining chip will help someone else put food on the table."

James Ford, another hourly employee, who is a production supervisor, jumped into the conversation. "I like that Trump doesn't sugarcoat anything," he said. "People get offended very easily by somebody being direct."

Other workers, like Todd Grizzle, a 25-year-old maintenance technician, said he could see both sides of the tariff debate. But his memories of the closing of Columbus Casting on the city's South Side are still fresh.

Once the nation's largest foundry, the century-old complex employed 800 people when it filed for bankruptcy in 2016. "There was a flood of people looking for work," Mr. Grizzle said.

The red-brick factory, which looked like something out of Dickens and covers 90 acres, is being demolished. The lesson that Mr. Grizzle said he had learned was that American jobs needed to be protected.

"I like the idea of the U.S. having allies," he said. "But if this can bring more jobs back to America, that's a good thing."

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Mnuchin Firm On Trump's Tough Trade Approach (Puglie, WT)

CWASHAR0000757

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Frederic Puglie

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin doubled down on the Trump administration's tough talk on trade over the weekend even as his international counterparts warned U.S. tariffs could stunt global growth and usher in a new era of job-killing protectionism.

In a *deja vu* of previous summits, Mr. Mnuchin found few allies at the two-day meeting of Group of 20 finance ministers and central bankers, many of whom openly labeled the recent tit-for-tat over tariffs U.S.-wrought "trade wars."

But Mr. Mnuchin declined to soften President Trump's thunder, which on Friday included the threat of an additional \$500 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods, noting he had backed Mr. Trump's hard-line stance from the get-go.

"I worked with him during the campaign, so I'm not new to any of these economic issues; I helped develop these economic issues." Mr. Mnuchin told The Washington Times. "From my first meeting at the G-20 ... I've tried to emphasize that this is about making sure that we have free and fair, two-way trade."

Economic analysts say Mr. Mnuchin did ease some fears sparked by his boss' tweets over the weekend on another front, denying the U.S. government wants a weaker dollar to boost exports and softening Mr. Trump's criticism that China and other major trading partners are manipulating their currencies to help their own exporters.

The U.S. treasury secretary said anyone surprised by Mr. Trump's combative stance hasn't been paying attention.

China, Mr. Mnuchin insisted, is fully aware of U.S. demands to let American companies compete freely and expand U.S. exports to slash the current \$370 billion trade deficit. But with his Chinese counterpart a no-show in Buenos Aires, the showdown quickly shifted to the brewing threat of a second trade war — with Europe.

Still angry over steel and aluminum tariffs and fearing possible duties on their car makers, European officials here toggled between indignation, threats of retaliation and — albeit flimsy — optimism that talks between Mr. Trump and European Union President Jean-Claude Juncker this week may help turn things around.

Mr. Juncker's economics commissioner, Pierre Moscovici, on Sunday tried to walk back comments by French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, who had warned that Europe would "refuse to negotiate [with Washington] with a gun to the head."

"We are of course ready to respond firmly; it's not a question of a gun, but we are prepared," Mr. Moscovici said. "But we're also there to build bridges, and we hope that this meeting, which is — I can see that — [eagerly] awaited by our American partners, will be the beginning of something."

Between the lines, however, the Europeans gathered here acknowledged that the breakdown of U.S.-China trade talks did not play in their favor, but Mr. Moscovici warned that the U.S. economy, too, was likely take a big blow in an escalating trade war.

"Protectionism is good for no one, and trade wars are not easy, contrary to what [Mr. Trump] said," he said. "They create no winners, only casualties."

But Mr. Mnuchin, whom many here see as a relatively moderate voice on Mr. Trump's economic policy team, was not backing down here. He insisted that, save for some "micro impacts" on small, specific markets, the U.S. economy has not and will not suffer a major hit if a trade war heats up.

"If you're looking at lobsters in Maine, or you're looking at bourbon in Kentucky, or you're looking at soybeans, there are clearly markets that are being followed," he said. "On a macro basis, we don't see yet any impact on the economy of the tariffs."

And despite Mr. Trump's aggressive move, the pull of the U.S. economy continued to be potent, Mr. Mnuchin observed.

"If requests for meetings is related to popularity," he said in the interview, "I'm pretty popular here."

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GLOBAL ISSUES

Defense Lawyer: Attorney General Sessions Objected To 9/11 Trial Plea Deal (Rosenberg, MH)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Miami Herald

By Carol Rosenberg

Attorney General Jeff Sessions called Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis in October to protest exploratory talks about a plea deal in the 9/11 case that would have taken the death penalty off the table, according to an investigation by defense attorneys who want a military judge to order both men to testify at the war court.

At issue is Mattis' Feb. 5 firing of the overseer of military commissions, Harvey Rishikof, at a time when he had been secretly exploring the possibility of guilty pleas to resolve the terror trial. Pretrial hearings continue this week in the case that started with the May 2012 arraignment of alleged plot mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed and four alleged accomplices.

Nearly 3,000 people died on Sept. 11, 2001 when 19 men seized four commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center, Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field. Within 20 months, the United States had seized the five men accused of directing, training or helping the hijackers with travel and finances. The CIA held and interrogated them for years in the spy agency's secret overseas prisons, complicating the path to trial.

Now, defense attorneys argue that Trump administration meddling in the guilty-plea negotiations merits, if not dismissing the case entirely, then making it a non-capital trial. Mattis and his acting general counsel, William Castle, have earlier said in affidavits that they fired Rishikof and his legal adviser, Gary Brown, for failure to follow proper Pentagon channels, a taboo in a military culture led by Mattis, a retired Marine general. SIGN UP

But the alternative explanation involving the plea deal merits open-court testimony from Sessions, Mattis and Castle, military justice expert Eugene Fidell said in an interview.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis during a hearing on Capitol Hill on April 26, 2018.

"There's certainly enough there that a thorough evidentiary hearing has to be conducted," said Fidell, who teaches at Yale law school. "If you're going to preserve the integrity of the system, and have any hope of fostering public confidence in the military commissions system, this has to be aired in a full way on the record."

Sessions needs to answer two key questions, Fidell said: "How did he find out about discussions of a possible plea deal — and did he talk to the White House?"

Defense attorney Jay Connell describes the behind-the-scenes machinations in a 22-page document obtained by McClatchy that justifies the need for a series of in-court witnesses on the question of meddling, or unlawful influence, as it is known at the war court.

They include Mattis, Deputy Secretary Patrick Shanahan, Castle, Rishikof, Brown, Sessions, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, deputy general counsel Ryan Newman, and U.S. Southern Command commander Adm. Kurt Tidd.

Harvey Rishikof moderating a Sept. 16, 2014, Debate on War and the Constitution.

Also sought is ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero. The document discloses for the first time that Romero unsuccessfully sought to negotiate a plea deal with the White House during the Obama administration.

The Guantánamo war court judiciary is meant to be independent of politics. Mattis appointed Rishikof, a civilian attorney, to serve as the top authority at military commissions, called the Convening Authority, on April 4, 2017 then fired him in February 2018. The Convening Authority has the power to approve or dismiss cases and make or approve plea deals, if the prosecutor proposes them.

But Connell writes in his request for a judicial order to question Castle about an Oct. 16, 2017 meeting with the top two war court officials, Rishikof and Brown. In that meeting, Connell writes, the men discussed a call earlier that month from Sessions to "Secretary Mattis to voice his objections to potential plea deals in the 9/11 case." The call "interrupted a meeting" that Mattis was having with "senior military officers," the document says.

At the Justice Department, Sessions' spokeswoman, Sarah Isgur Flores, said she could not confirm the details but said that the attorney general "certainly speaks with other Cabinet members regularly, Secretary Mattis included."

The spokeswoman declined to say whether Sessions met with Sept. 11 families or heard from the White House prior to phoning Mattis about the plea discussions.

Pentagon spokeswoman Navy Cmdr. Sarah Higgins declined comment, citing the Department of Defense's "longstanding practice not to comment on matters in litigation."

She specifically declined to confirm that the phone call happened, or say who Mattis was meeting with at the time of the call. On a question of whether this kind of involvement in the hybrid military-federal military commissions by the attorney general would be appropriate, she replied: "As always, the Department [of Defense] is committed to ensuring military commissions achieve a just resolution of all referred cases."

Connell, who headed up the investigation, told McClatchy the Department of Justice apparently found out about ongoing discussions because some defense attorneys wanted assurances that, if their clients pleaded guilty, the captives could serve their sentences at Guantánamo not a SuperMax federal prison in the United States.

Rishikof had been in touch with a deputy of Sessions to discuss whether such assurances were possible, Connell said.

The transfer of any Guantánamo detainee to U.S. soil for any purpose is currently prohibited by federal law.

A soon-to-retire Pentagon bureaucrat, Defense Logistics Agency General Counsel Jim Coyne, has been filling the job of Convening Authority on an interim basis.

This effort by the 9/11 defense lawyers is part of a long series of so-far unsuccessful efforts to dismiss or downgrade the capital case due to alleged political meddling across different administrations.

- In May, Mohammed's lawyers argued that President Donald Trump's incendiary tweets on military justice tainted the 9/11 trial, which has no start date. The judge, Army Col. James L. Pohl, has yet to rule.
- In 2016, the judge ruled that remarks by political leaders stretching back to the George W. Bush presidency did not constitute unlawful influence but said that lawyers will be allowed to more liberally scrutinize who is chosen for the jury of U.S. military officers.
- In 2015, Pohl found that a Pentagon order for war court judges to live at Guantánamo until the terror trials were over raised the specter of unlawful influence. He halted the pretrial hearings, and the move-in order was withdrawn.

McClatchy obtained the document seeking Sessions' and Mattis testimony in advance of a July 23-27 pretrial hearing in the case, which is expected to focus in part on limitations on defense attorneys in seeing original case evidence and independently investigating the CIA. Another unlawful influence motion is also on the docket brought by Mohammed's lawyers. That one alleges that, since CIA Director Gina Haspel is the ultimate decider on what Black Site evidence remains classified, the trial is tainted by her previous involvement in the secret prison network.

Judge Pohl had initially agreed to a defense request to take testimony from Rishikof and Castle. He reversed himself June 21, at the request of prosecutors who said paperwork provided the defense lawyers surrounding Rishikof's management objectives eliminated the need for live testimony.

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Drug-Fuelled HIV Surge Raises Concerns At AIDS Meeting (Roux, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Mariëtte Le Roux

Concerns over an HIV surge in countries where strict laws cause drug users to share virus-laced needles, were raised Monday at a world AIDS assembly in Amsterdam.

Some 15,000 delegates – researchers, campaigners, activists and people living with the AIDS-causing virus – gathered for a five-day war council amid dire warnings that complacency and a shortage of funds may yet cause AIDS to spiral out of control.

While reviewing the latest science and policy developments, the 22nd International AIDS conference is also seeking to harness the star power of celebrity activists such as singer Conchita Wurst to bolster a battle that experts warn is losing ground in some parts of the world.

The 2014 Eurovision song winner, an Austrian drag queen who announced in April she was HIV-positive, used the opening ceremony to question why millions of people still have no access to life-saving drugs.

"How long will it take until we make our research and affordable therapies accessible to every single human who needs it?" she asked.

"I would like to know why medical treatment advances that I have access to are still not available to so many affected."

Other celebrities from actress Charlize Theron and pop star Elton John to Britain's Prince Harry will pick up the call for action at the conference on Tuesday.

With a record 36.9 million people now living with HIV, experts warn that complacency, and a shortage of billions of dollars, risked undoing, even reversing, many hard-won gains.

"In Eastern Europe and Central Asia new infections have increased 30 percent since 2010," International AIDS Society (IAS)

president Linda-Gail Bekker said.

It was, she said, "the only region in the world where HIV is rapidly increasing, in large part related to injecting drug use."

A UNAIDS report last week said that new HIV infections, while down overall, were rising in about 50 countries.

– Too slow –

"Despite all the remarkable advances that have been made, progress on ending AIDS is still slow," said Tedros Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization.

And he warned the world "will not" meet UN 2020 targets on HIV/AIDS, "because there are too many places in the world where people don't get prevention and treatment services they need."

Spread mainly through sex and blood contact, the immune-system attacking HIV virus has infected nearly 80 million people since the early 1980s.

More than 35 million have died.

"When I was born 20 years ago with HIV, the landscape of the epidemic looked very different to what it does now," said Mercy Ngulube, a youth activist attending the conference.

"It is so wonderful to be able to live a life where I don't have to wake up and wonder if we have the tools to fight HIV. But it is also sad to live a life where I know that we have the tools and I know that people cannot access them."

According to UNAIDS, some 1.8 million people were newly infected with AIDS last year.

– ‘No’ to war on drugs –

This is partly due to the criminalisation of injecting drugs, particularly heroin, in many countries.

Fear forces users onto the fringes of society and puts them at risk of infection by sharing soiled needles, then passing the virus on to their sexual partners.

"Close to half – more than 45 percent of all new HIV infections in the world are in... the most affected and hard to reach groups, and that of course includes people who use drugs," said Chris Beyrer, director of the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at John Hopkins University.

The meeting saw an address by UNAIDS head Michel Sidibe interrupted by women protesting what they called the "patriarchy machine."

Sidibe faces calls for his resignation over complaints that he shielded a deputy from sexual harassment claims and attacked whistleblowers.

"Michel, we call on you to step away from the scripted and rehearsed propaganda machine and for once look us in the face... and speak the truth," one woman shouted.

Sidibe assured the group saying "I heard you," but added there must be no division in the fight against AIDS.

"We have come so far, but we have miles to go," he said.

The conference paid tribute to six IAS colleagues who died when Malaysian Airlines MH17, on its way to the 2014 AIDS conference in Melbourne, was shot down.

"The world continues to seek justice for what happened on that dreadful day," conference chairman Peter Reiss said.

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Ebola Infects Woman's Husband, Sons, A Year After She Recovered: Study (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

A woman who survived Ebola in July 2014 may have infected her husband and two sons more than a year later, said a study Tuesday, highlighting the need for "continued surveillance".

The seeming virus "flare-up" killed one of the boys, a 15-year-old, according to research findings published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases medical journal.

The boy tested positive for Ebola in Monrovia, Liberia, on November 19, 2015, and died four days later, it said.

His father and eight-year-old brother also tested positive for Ebola RNA – molecules that convey DNA instructions – and experienced symptoms such as tiredness, headache and fever. Both recovered.

The mother was also tested but had no traces of Ebola RNA, said the research team.

However, she carried Ebola antibodies, indicating she had previously been infected and that her body had launched an immune response to fight off the virus.

Further tests “suggested that she survived an acute Ebola virus infection in July 2014,” said a press statement.

The virus appears to have “re-emerged” after the woman gave birth to a fourth son, “making the infection flare up in October 2015, then transmitting the virus to her family,” it added.

Liberia was declared free of human-to-human Ebola virus transmission in May 2015.

The virus carried by the father and two sons appears to have been a “continuation” of the 2014 outbreak, when the mother was infected while taking care of her brother who died of Ebola.

The couple’s baby boy also had Ebola antibodies, which he likely got through his mother’s milk, the researchers said.

This was the first known case of transmission from a “persistently infected” Ebola survivor, the team reported.

It was already known that the virus, which caused a major outbreak in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea in 2013-15 in which more than 11,300 people died, can persist for many months in semen, in the eye, and in breast milk of women infected while pregnant.

The World Health Organization has said that transmission by people who beat infection is “rare”.

“Exactly how the virus was passed from family member to family member remains unclear, but the authors suggest it could be close physical contact or contact with body fluids,” said the journal statement.

Ebola was first identified in what was then Zaire – now the Democratic Republic of Congo – in 1976.

Since then, there have been several outbreaks, of which the West African outbreak was the deadliest by far.

Often contracted from eating infected bushmeat, the virus can be transmitted from person to person via the blood, certain body fluids, or organs of an infected or recently deceased person.

Transfer can happen by touching a sick or dead person, and likely also sexual intercourse, research has shown.

On average, the virus kills about half of the people it infects.

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For The First Time, A Female Ebola Survivor Infects Others (McNeil, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Donald G. McNeil Jr.

For the first time, scientists have found evidence that a woman can harbor the Ebola virus for more than a year and then infect others.

The discovery involved transmission within a Liberian family in the closing days of the West African epidemic that lasted from December 2014 to mid-2016. More than 28,600 people were infected and 11,325 died.

The episode raises new medical questions: Scientists do not know how the virus hid inside the woman for 13 months before re-emerging in lethal form.

However, because she fell ill soon after giving birth, experts believe the immune suppression that normally occurs in pregnancy may have triggered a relapse.

The case, published Monday by Lancet Infectious Diseases, also worries experts because fear of Ebola survivors and discrimination against them persists in Africa, and the notion that a female survivor can pass on the virus could worsen that.

In the past, although bits of virus have been found in the breast milk and spinal fluid of women who recover, only male survivors have been shown to infect anyone. Those transmissions were through sex — the virus is known to persist in semen for two years.

The family cluster came to light in November 2015, six months after Liberia had declared its outbreak over — prematurely, it turned out.

A 15-year-old boy, the woman's oldest son, was hospitalized vomiting blood. He tested positive for Ebola and, despite intensive treatment, died 10 days after his symptoms first appeared.

As soon as he tested positive, contact-tracers brought his whole family, including his 33-year-old mother, his 40-year-old father and his three younger brothers, aged 8, 5 and two months in for observation and testing.

The family also became the first participants in a clinical trial of a new Ebola vaccine, said Dr. Emily Kainne Dokubo, an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who was then the leader of the agency's Ebola response in Liberia and is the lead author of the Lancet study.

All 120 people with any recent contact with the family were vaccinated, she said. None fell ill, and that helped prove the Merck vaccine works.

This year, the vaccine was used to defeat the most recent Ebola outbreak, which took place in the Democratic Republic of Congo. About 3,200 people were vaccinated, and new cases faded out after only about three months. On Tuesday, the director-general of the World Health Organization will officially declare it over.

In Liberia, after the 15-year-old died, blood tests showed that his father and 8-year-old brother had Ebola. With treatment, both recovered.

The 5-year-old apparently was never infected.

Neither the mother nor the new baby had virus in their blood but, rather mysteriously, both had antibodies against it. That suggested the mother had had an earlier infection and that the baby had absorbed protective antibodies through breast-feeding.

Dr. Dokubo described what she and her C.D.C. colleagues believe happened:

In July, 2014, soon after Ebola first reached Liberia from Guinea, the mother had cared for her brother, a nurse's aide dying of an unknown illness. She was pregnant; she soon fell ill and miscarried, but slowly recovered.

Neither she nor her brother went to one of the new Ebola treatment units then being set up, so they never had Ebola tests.

"That was not uncommon, with all the stigma and fear at the time," Dr. Dokubo said.

Thirteen months later, in September, 2015, she gave birth to a healthy boy.

Shortly afterward, in October, she was hospitalized with fatigue, shortness of breath and swollen legs. Liberia had been declared Ebola-free in May, so she was not tested for it. Instead, she was treated for malaria and given blood transfusions because she was anemic, and sent home after three days. (The hospital tested its stored blood and none had Ebola virus or antibodies, the study said.)

But pregnancy lowers mothers' immune systems to protect fetuses from rejection, and Dr. Dokubo said pregnancy had probably unleashed a hidden reservoir of dormant virus within the woman; tests did not establish where that reservoir might be.

There was no evidence of sexual transmission; the woman's husband and two elder sons probably became infected while caring for her, Dr. Dokubo said.

Although the case is rare and highly unusual among the thousands of Ebola survivors in West Africa, it means that countries cannot become complacent even when outbreaks seem to be over, Dr. Dokubo said.

Also, she added, survivors must be tested for Ebola if they fall ill, even if they lack common Ebola symptoms.

In an editorial accompanying the Lancet article, Lorenzo Subissi, an Ebola expert at Sciensano, Belgium's public health institute, said the new study "could lead to additional stigma around survivors."

Survivors are often driven out of their villages or neighborhoods because people fear they may be infectious, so Dr. Subissi suggested that vaccination be used both to stop outbreaks and to calm the fears that lead to stigmatization and abuse of survivors.

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Doctors: Woman Likely Spread Ebola A Year After Infection (Cheng, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Maria Cheng

A Liberian woman who probably caught Ebola in 2014 may have infected three relatives a year after she first fell sick, doctors

reported in a study published Monday.

There have been previous instances of men spreading Ebola to women via sexual transmission — the virus can survive in semen for more than a year — but the new case is the first time scientists have suggested that Ebola was spread from a woman after such a prolonged period.

The rare possibility of Ebola spreading long after infection highlights the importance of monitoring survivors, especially with the imminent end of the most recent flare-up of the disease in Congo. That country's latest outbreak, announced in May, has so far recorded 38 confirmed cases, including 14 deaths. It is due to be declared contained on Wednesday, which will mark 42 days, or two incubation periods, since the last case was recorded.

"The Ebola virus hides in places where it can escape the antibodies from a body's immune system, so there is a need for vigilance," said Dr. David Heymann, a professor of infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who was not linked to the new research.

The unusual cluster of cases in Liberia was identified after the woman's 15-year-old son was diagnosed with Ebola in November 2015. Scientists then tested the rest of his family: the woman, her husband and their three younger sons.

The 15-year-old died a few days later. The father and an 8-year-old boy were positive for Ebola, but both recovered. The couple's 5-year-old son wasn't infected.

Doctors found Ebola antibodies in the mother, her breast milk and her 2-month-old baby, suggesting a previous infection and the possibility she passed on protection to her infant son through breastfeeding.

Researchers reported genetic similarities between the viruses taken from the father, the two boys and the strain circulating during the 2014-15 outbreak across Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, which ultimately killed more than 11,000 people in the biggest Ebola epidemic in history.

Scientists discovered the woman had cared for her brother in July 2014, who died after suffering Ebola-like symptoms but before being tested for the disease. The woman later experienced a similar illness, but never sought care.

Several weeks after giving birth to a baby in September 2015, the woman developed problems including fatigue and breathing difficulties. Doctors say that because pregnancy lowers the body's immune defenses, that may have allowed for the Ebola virus to re-emerge.

"The suspicious illness she had following delivery may have been a re-activation of Ebola, but we have no confirmatory tests," said Dr. Emily Kainne Dokubo, who led the Ebola response in Liberia for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the study's lead author.

Dokubo said it was possible the woman infected her husband and two older sons with Ebola when they took care of her — the disease is normally spread through contact with an infected patient's blood or other bodily fluids. The case report was published online Monday in the journal Lancet.

"There isn't complete evidence to reconstruct what happened, but this is the most likely scenario," said Lorenzo Subissi, an epidemiologist at Sciensano, a Belgian research institute, who was not part of the study.

Dokubo said such cases of Ebola re-emergence are exceptional, with only two reported instances: a Scottish nurse who developed meningitis caused by Ebola hidden in her brain and an American physician who had lingering virus in his eye. In those two cases, the virus did not spread any further.

"We don't want there to be a sense of complacency with people thinking that just because the outbreak is over, there's nothing more to be done," Dokubo said. "There is a risk of viral persistence and people should seek care immediately so that we can pick up any suspicious cases right away and stop a larger outbreak."

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Ebola In Survivor's Family Shows Deadly Virus's Lasting Effects (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

More than four years after the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, scientists are still uncovering sobering new information about the lasting effects of the virus on survivors.

A study published Monday describes a Liberian woman, 33, who survived an Ebola infection during the 2014-2015 epidemic and then, one year later, apparently infected her husband and two of their sons. One son, 15, died. The husband, 40, and other son, 8, recovered.

The study, in the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal, is the first indication of transmission from a female Ebola survivor, highlighting the continued risk for a resurgence of cases and the potential for large-scale outbreaks long after there is no longer active disease spread.

The epidemic in West Africa sickened more than 28,000 people, including more than 11,000 who died across Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. A few cases have been reported of sexual transmission from the semen of male survivors; there has also been one report suggesting that the virus spread through a survivor's breast milk.

Researchers aren't sure how the woman in the Lancet study infected her husband and sons. They ruled out travel to areas where there was an active Ebola outbreak and contact with animals that could spread the virus. The researchers said it was probably from close physical contact or contact with bodily fluids. (It is highly unlikely that the woman infected her husband through sex, researchers said. There is no recorded evidence of sexual transmission from female survivors.)

During the West African epidemic, family members in the same household became infected by cleaning a sick person's waste or washing linens or sharing utensils, said lead author Emily Kainne Dokubo, a medical officer and epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dokubo was deputy director of CDC's Ebola response in Liberia during the outbreak.

One of the biggest mysteries about Ebola, one of the world's deadliest pathogens, has been recurrent disease in survivors. Even after patients have fully recovered, virus particles have been detected in semen, breast milk, spinal fluid and the inside of the eye. American physician Ian Crozier's left eye turned from blue to green because of the virus that remained in his body after he was infected treating patients in Sierra Leone in September 2014. A Scottish nurse recovered but had several relapses.

A study published in the Lancet two years ago warned that Ebola lingers in semen much longer than previously thought. One man was found to still carry the virus 565 days after he recovered from the illness.

The latest study "highlights the fact that we are just starting to understand the epidemiology and clinical course of Ebola virus infection," said Anne Rimoin, an infectious disease expert at UCLA and longtime researcher on Ebola who was not involved in the study. "It also highlights the need for continued monitoring and study of Ebola virus survivors and their close contacts, long after an outbreak is declared 'over.' We still have a lot to learn about the nature of these persistent infections and what drives them."

Dokubo said: "We don't want countries to have a sense of complacency that everything is fine and we can go back to normal business. We need to keep in place the systems that can help prevent another outbreak from happening."

Most survivors are healthy and have developed protective antibodies to reduce the chances of getting infected again, Dokubo said. Ebola reemergence is very rare, and researchers don't know what factors are associated with viral persistence, she said.

At the same time, she said, "we don't want to sound the alarm and have people thinking there are a bunch of people walking around with active virus."

The findings could "lead to additional stigma around survivors of Ebola," Lorenzo Subissi, an infectious disease expert in Brussels, noted in an accompanying commentary. Vaccination, which was deployed to fight the recent Ebola outbreak in Congo, could become an important strategy to control both spread and stigma, he wrote.

A team of three dozen researchers from the CDC, the World Health Organization and Liberia's Ministry of Health, among others, investigated the woman's family and analyzed the genetics of the virus found among them.

In July 2014, the woman cared for her sick brother, who later died of Ebola. She became very sick with symptoms consistent with Ebola infection. (Initial symptoms typically include tiredness, headache and fever. That is often followed by vomiting, diarrhea and, in some cases, bleeding.) She recovered but was never diagnosed or treated; she was later found to have antibodies to the Ebola virus, indicating that she had been infected.

In May 2015, Liberia was declared Ebola-free. A flare-up of cases occurred afterward but was quickly contained. The country was again declared Ebola-free on Sept. 3, 2015.

On Sept. 27, 2015, the woman had a baby. She fell sick about a month later. The authors speculate that her infection re-emerged then, because pregnancy can cause latent infections to turn into symptomatic disease.

While she transferred protective antibodies against Ebola to her newborn son, the authors suggest that she transmitted the virus to the other family members during her flare-up.

Genetic analysis suggests that the virus carried by the father and the two infected sons was similar and a continuation of the West African disease outbreak.

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Marine Corps Aims For 15 ‘Suicide Drones’ Controlled By Single Front-Line Operator (Ernst, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Douglas Ernst

The U.S. Marine Corps sees swarming “suicide drones” as a key to survival on future battlefields.

A recent roundtable event with Capt. Matt Cornachio of Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory highlighted the emerging need for loitering munitions. Military officials see the drones as a literal lifesaver in situations where Marines do not have complete airspace control.

“It is not out of the realm of possible to think these things can be in the air for three up to four hours,” the officer told Marine Corps Times.

Marines have successfully tested a single operator controlling six drones at once, but Capt. Cornachio and other officials envision of future where 15 aircraft can fly with “minimal operator burden.”

“[It’s about] having the machines do the work for you,” he added.

One way the Corps plans on achieving its goal is by equipping future drones with automatic target recognition capability.

“The Corps already is amid plans to equip its RQ-21 Blackjack drone with the Intrepid Tiger II counter radar capability payload, according to the Corps’ 2018 aviation plan,” the newspaper reported.

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ISIS

ISIS 2.0?: Coordinated Attack Sparks Fear Islamic State May Be Rebuilding In Iraq (Muñoz, WT)

Muqtada al-Sadr, political upheaval generated by parliamentary elections exacerbates alarm

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Carlo Muñoz

A brazen, coordinated daytime attack in the heart of northern Iraq’s Kurdistan region Monday is stoking concerns that the threat posed by the Islamic State has not subsided but is rebuilding its resources in the months after Washington and Baghdad declared the group’s defeat last July.

The strike on government facilities in Irbil, the capital of Iraq’s semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, was the group’s highest-profile attack against the city since its blistering military campaign seized territory across Syria and northern Iraq in 2014.

One week after the top U.S. commander in the Middle East insisted that the terrorist group had been contained, three gunmen shot their way into Irbil’s main regional government building.

They continued firing at employees before all three were killed or captured by security forces, according to news reports. One employee was killed and four security force members were injured during the shootout with the militants, who had taken control of the third floor of the governorate building.

“We believe that the attackers are from Islamic State because of the tactics they used in breaking into the building from the main gate,” a security official told the Reuters news agency. At press time, Islamic State had not officially claimed responsibility for the attack.

Kurdish paramilitary forces in Iraq and Syria have been seen as key to the successful fight to turn back Islamic State, often taking the lead in battles alongside Iraqi and U.S. forces.

U.S. military officials characterized a burst of Islamic State operations in sparsely populated Iraqi provinces as the last desperate operations of a movement that once sought to establish a permanent Islamist “caliphate” in the heart of the Middle East.

"We've always acknowledged that the [Islamic State] networks will go to ground. They will continue to return to some of their terrorist roots. They will continue to try to exert influence and re-exert their networks" after the loss last July of the terrorist group's de facto Iraqi capital of Mosul — 50 miles west of Irbil, Gen. Joseph Votel, U.S. Central Command chief, said last week.

American and allied forces are working with their counterparts in Baghdad to address the threat posed by Islamic State remnants, Gen. Votel told reporters at the Pentagon. However, U.S. and Iraqi military leaders say they are confident that the terrorist group is not poised to reassert its dominance in Iraq or elsewhere in the region.

"I'm not ready to declare that an ISIS comeback, or a resurgence, to this particular point," Gen. Votel said.

President Trump insisted last week that the fight against Islamic State was all but over.

"I think that when you look at all of the progress that's been made in certain sections with the eradication of ISIS, about 98 percent, 99 percent there," he said during a joint press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki.

The attack in Irbil has raised questions over the U.S. assessment.

According to reports, several men armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades stormed the Kurdistan Regional Government complex in Irbil and engaged with local security forces in a five-hour gunbattle inside the building. The attackers breached the initial security perimeter and took hostages inside the building. One Kurdish government employee was killed and two Kurdish police officers were wounded, Reuters reported.

One of the gunmen was killed by security forces at the scene, and another reportedly detonated a suicide vest during the attack, Al Jazeera reported. A third attacker was wounded and taken into custody.

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for series of terrorist strikes that has Iraqis fearing its full-scale resurgence in the country.

Militants have carried out dozens of kidnappings, suicide bombings and attacks against local government leaders and security forces in the Iraqi provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk and Saladin, just northeast of Baghdad. The terrorist group has targeted electric plants and oil pipelines and has set up fake security checkpoints along the main road between Kirkuk and Baghdad, The Washington Post reported last week.

"Of course people are nervous. People finally thought there was stability and that they can travel wherever they want, and then there are these attacks and this video, and people are afraid again," Diyala Provincial Council member Imad Mahmoud told the newspaper.

"The terrorists are attacking from the empty desert and the mountains where there are still small cells. They are not large in number, but they are launching surprise, fast attacks and they have people inside the towns who are helping them," he said.

Frustration and fear about the potential rise of Islamic State's next generation in Iraq has been exacerbated by the political upheaval generated by parliamentary elections in May in which a party headed by nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr came first and led to lengthy, inconclusive coalition talks.

Southern unrest

The Islamic State's resurgence has been hastened by growing unrest in Iraq's south. Hundreds of protesters have descended on the southwestern city of Basra in the past week to demand better government services and to lambaste rampant corruption that they say plagues the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

In an attempt to quell the unrest in Basra and the surrounding areas such as Amara, Nasiriya and Najaf, Mr. al-Abadi ordered units from the Iraqi army's 9th Division to restore order. The Iraqi leader also cut all internet access in Baghdad to keep protest organizers from rallying more followers to their cause, according to local reports.

Mr. al-Sadr's Sairoon alliance captured over 40 percent of the parliamentary vote in the May elections, and the Iranian-backed Fatah alliance came in second. Mr. al-Abadi's Victory alliance came in third place, forcing Mr. al-Abadi's party to form a ruling coalition with Tehran and the Sadrist.

Mr. al-Sadr's victory has drawn concern from U.S. and allied commanders, since the Shiite cleric has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and warning that those troops could become targets of Shiite paramilitary groups.

Canadian forces were tapped this month to lead NATO's new military adviser mission in Iraq, as part of an effort to transform the U.S.-led coalition into a more multinational campaign.

The NATO mission can proceed only with the explicit endorsement and cooperation from Baghdad, which U.S. and allied military leaders acknowledge is uncertain.

"We are in Iraq at the invitation of the government of Iraq, and we are pursuing the things that they have asked us to provide assistance on," Gen. Votel said. "And as we move forward, I expect that we will continue to do that."

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UK Expects US Trial For Syria 'Beatles' Fighters (Ritchie, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Alice Ritchie

Britain said Monday it was sharing intelligence to help the United States bring to trial two British fighters captured in Syria, known as the "Beatles," and sparked outrage by saying it would not block the death penalty.

Security Minister Ben Wallace told MPs that a British trial was unlikely for Alexandra Amon Kotey and El Shafee el-Sheikh, who were picked up earlier this year by US-backed Syrian forces.

He also said the pair were not UK citizens, without giving further details. News reports had said that the government had unusually stripped them of their nationality.

But the failure to seek assurances from Washington that the two men would not face the death penalty drew anger from lawmakers of all parties, while Amnesty International called it "deeply worrying".

"We do not think we have the evidence here to try them in the United Kingdom... it is likely there is a trial that is carried out in the United States," Wallace told the House of Commons.

He added: "When the request came in for sharing of evidence, this government took the decision – rare as it is – to share that evidence without seeking assurances."

Kotey and Sheikh were part of a four-member kidnapping gang within the Islamic State group dubbed "The Beatles" by their captives due to their heavy British accents.

They were notorious for videotaping beheadings and are believed to have killed American journalist James Foley and many Western aid workers.

Wallace said assurances about the death penalty might "get in the way" of a future trial, but added: "We're not talking about UK citizens."

He also said that "we should not forget that the crimes that we're talking about involve the beheading and videoing of those beheading dozens of innocent people by one of the most abhorrent organisations walking this earth."

– Don't make them martyrs –

The fate of the pair was discussed in a letter by British Home Secretary Sajid Javid to US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, which was leaked to the Daily Telegraph.

The decision not to demand assurances on the death penalty sparked widespread anger and an emergency Commons debate on Monday.

One Labour MP accused the government of having "unilaterally ripped up" years of opposition to capital punishment around the world, while a former minister in the ruling Conservatives said it was a "major departure".

Amnesty spokesman Allan Hogarth said: "A failure to seek assurances on this case seriously jeopardises the UK's position as a strong advocate for the abolition of the death penalty."

Foley's mother Diane told BBC radio that her son's killers should go to jail but said putting them to death "would just make them martyrs in their twisted ideology".

Wallace insisted: "Our longstanding position on the use of the death penalty has not changed."

He added that Britain "will not share information with the United States if those individuals were going to end up in Guantanamo Bay", the US detention camp on Cuba.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) caught Kotey in January as he tried to flee Syria for Turkey, while a US defence official said in February that Sheikh had also been captured by Syrian rebel forces.

Wallace said: "The individuals that we're talking about, or foreign fighters at the moment in general, are currently held by non-state

actors in Syria.

"That is a big challenge for all European states and indeed the US about how those people are brought back."

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British Official Drops Demand To Forgo Death Penalty In ISIS Case, But Government Hedges (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Britain's home secretary last month sent a letter to Attorney General Jeff Sessions, stating that his government would drop a demand that two alleged Islamic State militants be spared the death penalty if convicted in a U.S. court, in an apparent bid to resolve a standoff between the countries over which one should take custody of the men.

The June 22 letter by Sajid Javid to Sessions sparked an uproar in Britain when it was described on Sunday in the Telegraph, a British newspaper. In response, Prime Minister Theresa May, through a spokeswoman, said the government's opposition to capital punishment remains unchanged.

That long-standing policy against the death penalty has been seen as one impediment to a prosecution in the United States of Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, who allegedly belonged to a four-member Islamic State cell thought to have played a key role in torturing and killing American and British hostages. The men, whose British accents gave the cell its moniker the Beatles, were captured and detained in Syria.

U.S. prosecutors have requested that the British share evidence they've acquired, including a voice analysis that could aid in the identification of Kotey. But the British government had balked at sharing evidence without some assurance that it would not be used in a prosecution that might end in a death sentence.

Though some officials within May's conservative government are not averse to capital punishment, the British public is staunchly against it. To reassure the public, Security Minister Ben Wallace on Monday told Parliament: "Our long-standing position on use of the death penalty has not changed. The U.K. has a long-standing policy of opposing the death penalty as a matter of principle, regardless of nationality."

The two militants, whose British citizenship was revoked over their alleged affiliation with the cell, are being held in Syria, where they were captured in February by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, the main ally of the United States in Syria.

"I am of the view that there are strong reasons for not requiring a death penalty assurance in this specific case, so no such assurances will be sought," Javid wrote in the letter, according to the Telegraph.

May's office told reporters that there was no contradiction between the government's opposition to the death penalty and Javid's decision not to seek an assurance against execution.

"It's an extraordinary statement about the British reluctance to prosecute these men, that they're willing to withdraw requirements that they have imposed on U.S. cooperation for so long," said Nicholas J. Lewin, a former counterterrorism prosecutor in Manhattan. "It strikes me as a finely honed effort to get the U.S. to take these guys and prosecute them."

Some relatives of the victims, including the mother of James Foley, have spoken out against seeking the death penalty, saying they would prefer that the men serve life in prison.

The Telegraph also reported that according to other documents, British officials have assessed that Kotey and Elsheikh may be sent to the U.S. military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and that such an outcome would not be formally opposed.

Wallace, the security minister, appeared to dispute that possibility, too. "The U.K. government's long-standing position is that the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay should close. Where we share evidence with the [United States], it must be for the express purpose of progressing a criminal prosecution and we have made that clear to the United States," he told parliament.

It is not clear what impact Javid's letter to Sessions has had on Trump administration deliberations over how to handle the militants. Although career prosecutors think they can win at trial, Sessions personally favors sending the men to Guantanamo. And the position of the State and Defense departments has been that Britain, as the militants' country of origin, should take them for prosecution.

The National Security Council declined to discuss the matter, issuing the following statement: "President Trump is committed to using all available tools to defeat terrorism and protect the United States homeland and its interests abroad. Decisions regarding the disposition of captured terrorists will be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account legal requirements and the facts of each case."

A Justice Department spokesman also declined to comment on the matter. "The president and his national security team will pursue the option that best protects the national security interests of the United States," spokesman Wyn Hornbuckle said.

Christopher Costa, who until earlier this year was Trump's senior director for counterterrorism and who now heads the International Spy Museum, said: "My bottom line is these individuals have to face justice, and right now the best form of justice would be the United States criminal justice system."

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NEAR EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Analysis: Trump's Iran Threat Latest Combative Global Move (Lemire, Miller, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Jonathan Lemire And Zeke Miller

As the presidential tweets ricochet from one world hot spot to another, a Trump Doctrine has emerged: Claim matchless strength, suffer no slight and counter-punch harder than you are hit — at least verbally.

President Donald Trump's searing ALL CAPS response to a relatively routine Iran provocation is the latest example of Trump's refusal to show weakness, continuing a pattern that includes showdowns with North Korea, China and even NATO allies, with Russia the notable exception. Trump's tough-guy rhetoric has become a defining characteristic of his overseas affairs, as have the relatively modest results.

His late Sunday tweet warning of "CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE" caught Trump's staff by surprise, sparked a fresh day of foreign policy confusion, and triggered fears of a potential nuclear showdown in the Middle East. The tweet was reminiscent of Trump's brash warning of "fire and fury" for North Korea last year, part of an exchange of bravado in which he and Kim Jong Un's government compared the relative size of their nuclear buttons.

White House officials now cast those exchanges with Kim as a negotiating tactic to bring the mercurial autocrat to the negotiating table, culminating in last month's Singapore summit. But despite Trump's pronouncements that he is "very happy" with the results of the summit, the North has yet to take concrete steps toward denuclearizing, nor has it returned the remains of some U.S. service members, as was promised as part of the two-page agreement signed in Singapore.

Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders wouldn't rule out that the latest tweet about Iran was a similar negotiating gambit. "I'm not going to get into the president's strategy," she said Monday. "But I think he's very clear about what he's not going to allow to take place."

The Iran tweet, responding to the latest threat from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, came on the heels of a frustrating week for a White House reeling from denunciations of Trump's treatment of Russia's Vladimir Putin during their summit in Helsinki. The president initially refused to say whether he believed the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, instead giving equal weight to Putin's denials.

Critics were quick to seize upon his Iran threat as an attempt to change the subject. Sanders retorted: "I think the president has the ability, unlike a lot of those in the media, to actually focus on more than one issue at a time."

But the broadside to Tehran fit a pattern for Trump, a commander in chief who responds to the slightest provocation with punishment. The all-caps shot across Iran's bow appeared to be prompted by a speech by Rouhani, who told diplomats Sunday in Tehran that Americans "must understand that war with Iran is the mother of all wars and peace with Iran is the mother of all peace," state television reported.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., tweeted that Trump has a "dangerous habit" of attacking world leaders online. She said his "obsession with looking tough on Twitter is weakening our standing on the world stage and seriously jeopardizing our national security."

Beyond his monthslong rhetorical volleys with Kim, Trump has unleashed verbal attacks against friend and foe alike when he felt disrespected. After last month's Group of Seven meeting of industrialized nations in Canada, that nation's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, delivered a mild rebuke to Trump by suggesting that Canada may have to levy retaliatory tariffs against the United States.

"Canadians, we're polite, we're reasonable, but we also will not be pushed around," Trudeau said.

Seeing the news coverage while on Air Force One, Trump unleashed a furious series of tweets against arguably the United States' closest ally, calling Trudeau "very dishonest & weak" and threatening to escalate tensions further.

During this month's NATO summit in Brussels, Trump deployed similarly incendiary language, accusing Germany of being controlled by Russia and repeatedly casting doubt on the cornerstone of the NATO alliance, a commitment to mutual defense. Trump claimed his rhetoric secured concessions from NATO allies to boost their spending on defense closer to the previously agreed-upon target of 2 percent of gross domestic product by 2024, but the increases he claimed were already in the works. As the U.S. leader reveled in a celebratory media tour, allies denied they had given Trump anything of substance.

During the tariff standoff with China, Trump has repeatedly escalated his fiery language — and boasted that trade wars are "easy to win" — only to see Beijing retaliate and levy tariffs that could cripple some American workers, including farmers, who have trended toward supporting the president.

But for all of Trump's diplomatic bluster, there is one nation with which he has tended to pull his punches: Russia.

As the special counsel probe into possible links between Russia and Trump campaign officials forges on, Trump has stepped up his attacks on the investigation while also trying to draw closer to Moscow. In one of his tweets over the weekend, he deemed Russian election interference "a big hoax," yet again casting doubt on the findings of this nation's intelligence agencies.

Sanders insisted Monday that the Trump "has been extremely tough on Russia, probably more so than with any other country" and wondered "why that is so hard for the media to write about."

But while the Trump administration has moved to enact some tough sanctions on Russia, the president himself has repeatedly sought to tighten ties to Putin, whom he invited to the White House this fall even after the firestorm of controversy sparked by the Helsinki summit.

Putin's visit drew a cool response from Republican leaders, who have no plans for the Russian to address Congress. And some would prefer he not visit the U.S. in the fall at all.

"I'm one who thinks that it's a good thing for leaders of countries to talk, but I would consider putting that one on the back burner for a while," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

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Trump And Top Aides Target Iran, Suddenly Escalating Tensions (Wilkinson, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Tracy Wilkinson

In an abrupt escalation of tensions with Iran, President Trump is threatening the Islamic Republic with war unless it changes its ways, in concert with senior advisors who are speaking out on separate fronts.

Critics immediately branded the threats as Trump's attempt to divert attention from widespread, bipartisan disapproval of his troubled dealings with Russia, criticism that has only grown since last week's Helsinki summit with President Vladimir Putin and amid attention to the upcoming trial of his former campaign manager, Paul Manafort.

But in contrast to the Russia controversy, where Trump's embrace of Putin has seemed oddly at cross-purposes with the tough policies of his own administration, on Iran, senior officials echoed the president on Sunday and Monday with their tough talk, just weeks before the administration plans to slap brutal economic sanctions on the country.

In a blistering tweet, Trump wrote shortly before midnight Sunday in Washington, "To Iranian President Rouhani," and then hit his caps-lock button for the message:

Trump was apparently responding to a speech earlier Sunday by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in which the Iranian warned of a "mother of all wars" if the United States attacked.

"Mr. Trump, don't play with the lion's tail," Rouhani warned. He also said, however, that peaceful ties between the two countries could be the "mother of all peace."

Though Trump may have been replying to Rouhani, the tweet came as part of an overall administration escalation of verbal attacks on Iran. On Sunday evening in Simi Valley, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo gave a harsh speech denouncing what he called Tehran's "Mafia" government and pledging support for Iranians who would challenge it.

Pompeo said Iran's clerics and "hypocritical holy men" run a kleptocracy that enriches them while impoverishing ordinary Iranians, all while quashing domestic opponents and promoting terrorism abroad.

And on Monday, John R. Bolton, Trump's national security advisor, echoed Trump's angry tweet in similar words. The president "told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before," Bolton, a longtime hawk, said in a statement.

Trump's tweet was reminiscent of his threats, issued at just about this time last summer, to unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen" against a nuclear-armed North Korea if it attacked U.S. territory.

Since then, however, Trump has embarked on a rapprochement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the still-unfulfilled quest to begin to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. The two leaders met at a one-day summit in Singapore in June in which Trump made a major concession to Kim — canceling the United States' joint military exercises with South Korea — and received little, if anything, in return.

This outburst could prove more perilous, however.

Unlike with North Korea, where U.S. officials and experts agreed there was no military option against a nuclear-armed adversary, Iran hasn't built a nuclear weapon and therefore is more exposed. Several senior members of the administration — including Pompeo — at least until recently believed Iran could be contained through U.S. military action.

Also, in the case of North Korea, regional players such as South Korea and Japan were invested in finding a peaceful solution. With Iran, however, Washington's closest like-minded allies on the issue — Saudi Arabia and Israel — routinely engage in similar bellicose rhetoric, which only encourages Trump.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders would not say whether Trump consulted his national security team before the tweet. She blamed the escalation on Iran.

"If anybody's inciting anything, look no further than to Iran," she said.

The Iran tensions come after Trump withdrew the United States from an agreement to curtail Iran's nuclear activities — a landmark, international pact signed in 2015 that the administration hopes to unravel.

Tehran was abiding by the terms of the nuclear agreement, but Trump said that pact didn't go far enough. He said he wants to confront all of Tehran's "malign behavior," such as support for regional militant groups, in addition to thwarting the country's nuclear potential.

Christopher R. Hill, a veteran diplomat in Republican and Democratic administrations, said Trump's hostile rhetoric toward Iran was "raw meat" for his political base and "an effort to shift the subject" away from the Putin summit.

"Things have not gone well and this idea that he's a tough guy has really frayed," Hill said. "Sure, he's been tough on Canada and Germany, but he looked weak when he was face-to-face with Putin. This looks like an effort to tell his base, 'I really am tough.'"

Washington will unilaterally reimpose economic sanctions on Iran in a few weeks and has demanded, so far unsuccessfully, that other nations stop all imports of Iranian oil. Several European allies, who are seeking to keep the Iran agreement alive, have sought waivers from the sanctions, but the State Department has seemed unlikely to grant them.

The initial sanctions, targeting Iran's automotive sector and trade in gold and other metals, will "snap back" Aug. 6, said Brian Hook, State's director of policy planning. A second tranche of the punitive measures, targeting the energy sector and transactions with the Central Bank of Iran, go into effect Nov. 4, Hook said.

Further crippling Iran's economy potentially, the sanctions would make it extremely difficult for other countries and international companies to do business with Tehran.

Also this week, Pompeo is hosting the first ministerial level conference on religious freedom, with foreign ministers of several nations planning to attend. It gives the secretary another opportunity to highlight what he has described as Iran's repression of religious minorities.

Reaction in Congress to Trump's ratcheting up of anti-Iran rhetoric was mixed.

Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia, a Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Trump's "belligerent" tweet was "another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war" with Iran.

"The administration's hostile rhetoric and efforts to stir up internal protests against the regime are dangerous," Kaine said.

However, a senior Republican congressional aide said Trump's tirade could be part of an approach to scare Iran, and thus constrain it, that has broad party support. After Iran was largely contained in 2008, it then spread its reach to the point where its forces or proxies now are operating in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, said the official, who requested anonymity to speak candidly.

"The goal is to bottle them back up without firing a shot," the aide said. "And given Pompeo's speech last night, you can't say [Trump's] weird tweets come in the absence of a wider strategic policy."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised what he called Trump's "bold stance" against "Iranian aggression." Netanyahu was speaking ahead of a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Israel wants Russia to help remove pro-Iranian forces from Syria.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif also used Twitter, and wrote in capital letters, to respond to Trump. "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED," Zarif wrote. "The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago, he added, apparently alluding to the North Korea comments.

"We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries," Zarif said. "BE CAUTIOUS!"

On the streets of Tehran, ordinary Iranians were worried that the combative rhetoric would lead to U.S. military action or economic punishment that mostly hurts citizens. But they also continued to show their anger at what many see as the mismanagement of the country by their own leaders.

"Our rulers are incompetent and inefficient; if they had been good governors, they would have come up with efficient ways to run the country and meet the needs of their own people," said Hadi Pourasel, 55, manager of a taxi agency. "Now the threat of the U.S. administration adds to our miseries."

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Trump's Dangerous Obsession With Iran (WP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Washington Post

In America's fevered political landscape, supporters of President Trump often cast criticism of him as a symptom of a condition: "Trump derangement syndrome." Trump's opponents are so possessed by their contempt for him, the diagnosis goes, that they embrace positions and pursue policy goals they would never consider in any other context. Supposed examples of this include the newfound Russophobia among some American liberals and the knee-jerk rejection to Trump's overtures to North Korea — signs of partisan tribalism supposedly displacing political logic.

But Trump and his lieutenants are guilty of their own derangement syndromes, most conspicuously when it comes to Iran. Even as Trump has gone out of his way to cozy up to an autocrat in Moscow, embraced human-rights-abusing Arab monarchs and celebrated his friendliness with the world's most isolated dictator, he sees in Tehran an implacable, irreconcilable enemy.

On Sunday night, the White House ratcheted up tensions with the Islamic republic. Trump issued a dramatic tweet, addressing Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in all caps: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

The tweet received a bullish reply from Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, the following day.

COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them —albeit more civilized ones—for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!— Javad Zarif (@JZarif) July 23, 2018

Trump's ire was apparently sparked by comments Rouhani made on Sunday in a meeting with Iranian diplomats. "America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said, delivering a pointed warning to the Trump administration not to engage in efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime.

Rouhani seemed to be offering a rebuttal to the speech Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered later that day. During that address, Pompeo launched a lengthy attack on Iran's political leadership, arguing the theocratic regime was a corrupt "kleptocracy"

and a “mafia.”

“To our Iranian American and Iranian friends, tonight I tell you that the Trump administration dreams the same dreams for the people of Iran as you do,” Pompeo said, “and through our labors and God’s providence, that day will come true.”

Pompeo’s remarks were the latest broadside in a wider diplomatic offensive against Iran. Since reneging on its end of the nuclear deal with Tehran, the White House is pushing for renewed and tougher sanctions on Iran and has cheered all glimmers of protest within the country. Trump has also consistently cast Iran as a global menace, parroting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s talking points about the country’s corrosive influence in the Middle East.

There is no doubt senior Trump administration officials want regime change. Pompeo and many of his former colleagues on Capitol Hill court the support of anti-regime outfits in the Iranian diaspora that have little clout at home. National security adviser John Bolton, who has spent much of his career saber-rattling at Iran, issued a statement reiterating Trump’s threats. “I spoke to the President over the last several days,” it read, “and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before.” A coterie of other Washington neoconservatives who once championed the ill-fated invasion of Iraq have resurfaced, urging a new confrontation.

That’s why numerous Iran analysts are wary of parallels between Trump’s current tweets and the “fire and fury” declarations that preceded his historic summit with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un. “Unlike the case of North Korea, enmity with Iran is quite ideological in this administration,” said Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group.

Ari Fleischer says the US should destabilize Iran to initiate regime change: “The more unstable we can help Iran to become, the better it is to actually secure peace” <https://t.co/JyRTeXfpVr> pic.twitter.com/whXey0jhKc— Media Matters (@mmfa) July 23, 2018

Meanwhile, Rouhani’s position is growing weaker. Many Iranians now pin the country’s slumping economy on the president, angry that the nuclear deal has not delivered the economic benefits he promised. The hard-line forces Rouhani once maneuvered against are ascendant.

The Trump administration “has strengthened the hand of hardline Iranian factions, in the clerical and judicial establishment as well as in the Revolutionary Guards, who always said it was a mistake to strike a deal with the U.S.,” reported Najmeh Bozorgmehr of the Financial Times. “These groups, who believe their position has been vindicated, have been able to use the threats from Mr Trump and others to reassert their authority, adding to pressure on Mr Rouhani, whose credibility has been badly damaged by his failure to keep the deal and new economic curbs from Washington.”

That could provoke a backlash from the regime, via its proxy forces in various corners of the Middle East. “Western countries should be aware that if they put too much pressure on Iran, it could unleash radical Shia forces and trigger a new wave of Islamic radicalism,” added Hossein Marashi, a reformist politician in Tehran.

That may be exactly what Washington’s own hard-liners want. On Sunday, Pompeo dismissed any prospect that there are real political differences in Tehran, arguing that Rouhani and Zarif are “merely polished frontmen for the ayatollah’s international con artistry. Their nuclear deal didn’t make them moderates; it made them wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Trump’s lieutenants are positioning themselves as champions of revolutionary change within Iran — or for armed conflict with an increasingly cornered adversary.

But the Trump administration’s grandstanding on this front is unlikely to galvanize popular discontent within Iran. “The more the U.S. threatens Iran, and the more ordinary Iranians have to deal with economic hardships,” argued Vaez, “the less motivation [Iranians] may have for pursuing any kind of radical change.” Leadership in Tehran, Vaez told Today’s WorldView, is skilled at survival and content to batten down the hatches and wait out the Trump administration.

My colleague Jason Rezaian, who endured a year and a half in Iranian prison, attended Pompeo’s event. For all its zeal for change, he observed, the Trump administration is simply the wrong messenger.

“Most of what Pompeo said about the depravity of Iran’s rulers was true,” wrote Rezaian, “but when coupled with U.S. moves that directly hurt Iranians — specifically, stiff economic sanctions and the recently upheld travel ban — it is difficult for the administration to support its own claims that the well-being and prosperity of Iranians matter.”

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Trump Steps Up Pressure, But Iran Says It’s ‘Unimpressed’ (Lee, Miller, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Matthew Lee And Zeke Miller

President Donald Trump's explosive Twitter threat to Iran's leader comes as his administration is ratcheting up a pressure campaign on the Islamic republic that many suspect is aimed at regime change.

No one is predicting imminent war. But Trump's bellicose, all-caps challenge addressed to President Hassan Rouhani followed a speech by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which he accused Iran's leadership of massive corruption and widespread rights abuses and urged Iranians to rise up in protest.

Both the tweet and the speech landed less than two weeks before the administration will begin re-imposing sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the 2015 nuclear deal. In the meantime, the U.S. is stepping up Farsi-language outreach that is intended to support Iranians demonstrating against the policies of their government.

Trump's tweet doesn't appear to have been prompted by any notable shift in rhetoric from Iran.

It could have been an impulsive reaction to reports from Tehran quoting Rouhani as giving the U.S. an oft-repeated reminder that conflict with Iran would be "the mother of all wars." Yet animosity directed at the Iranian leadership is an established part of the administration's broader foreign policy.

Iran publicly shrugged off Trump's late Sunday message — "NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Tweeted Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday: "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them — albeit more civilized ones — for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Asked at the White House if he had concerns about provoking Iran, Trump said simply, "None at all."

Tehran is already aware of what is coming from the administration as consequences of Trump's May withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord take shape.

As Pompeo noted in his speech to Iranian-Americans and others in California on Sunday, the centerpiece will be the re-imposition of U.S. economic sanctions; the first batch will go back into force Aug. 4, targeting the Iranian automotive sector and trade in gold and other metals. A more significant set of sanctions that will hit Iran's oil industry and central bank by punishing countries and companies that do business with them will resume Nov. 4.

"Right now, the United States is undertaking a diplomatic and financial pressure campaign to cut off the funds that the regime uses to enrich itself and support death and destruction," Pompeo said in his speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley.

Pompeo also slammed Iran's political, judicial and military officials, accusing several by name of participating in rampant corruption, and called its religious leaders "hypocritical holy men" who amassed wealth while allowing their people to suffer. He said the government has "heartlessly repressed its own people's human rights, dignity and fundamental freedoms," and he hailed the "proud Iranian people (for) not staying silent about their government's many abuses."

"The United States under President Trump will not stay silent either," he said.

He was right. True to form, Trump did not stay silent. But the White House blamed Rouhani for inciting the war of words with his comment that "America must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars."

"WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!," Trump wrote.

Reaction from Congress, particularly Democrats, was swift and critical.

Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, acknowledged that Iran's terrorist activities in the Middle East pose a threat but suggested it wouldn't be solved through a tweet from Trump.

"Sadly, after pulling us out of the nuclear deal with Europe and Iran, there doesn't seem to be strategy for how to move forward to fight Iran's activities," she said.

And Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, the 2016 Democratic vice presidential candidate, called the Twitter blast from the White House "another warning sign that Trump is blundering toward war with Iran."

Trump's National Security Council pushed back with a statement saying: "Our differences are with the Iranian regime's actions and, in particular, with the actions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, not the Iranian people. The Trump administration's Iran

policy seeks to address the totality of these threats and malign activities and to bring about a change in the Iranian regime's behavior."

"If anybody's inciting anything, look no further than to Iran," said White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said. She added that Trump has been "very clear about what he's not going to allow to take place."

Trump has a history of firing off heated tweets that seem to quickly escalate long-standing disputes with leaders of nations at odds with the U.S.

In the case of North Korea, the verbal war cooled quickly and gradually led to the high-profile summit and denuclearization talks. Still, there has been little tangible progress in a global push to rid North Korea of its nuclear weapons program since the historic Trump-Kim Jong Un summit on June 12.

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White House Says Iran's Hassan Rouhani To Blame For Provoking Trump's Warlike Threats (Boyer, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dave Boyer

The White House blamed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Monday for provoking warlike threats from President Trump, as the administration sought to step up economic and political pressure on Iran in a campaign similar to the strategy that brought North Korea to the nuclear bargaining table.

Gearing up to implement tough economic sanctions on an Iranian economy that is already faltering, Mr. Trump and his top advisers also have made it clear to Iran's leaders in the past two days that the U.S. will no longer sit back quietly in the face of Tehran's typical "death to America" rhetoric and other threats.

In a tweet shortly before midnight Sunday, Mr. Trump issued an all-caps warning directly to Mr. Rouhani: "NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKE OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

It was reminiscent of Mr. Trump's "fire and fury" warning to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last summer.

Mr. Trump fired this online shot across the bow after the Iranian leader declared in Tehran, "America must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars."

Liberals accused Mr. Trump of attempting to pivot away from negative media coverage of his summit last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin by threatening war against another longtime U.S. adversary in the Middle East.

"President Trump's belligerent tweet is another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war with Iran," said Sen. Tim Kaine, Virginia Democrat and co-author of a 2015 law that gave Congress the right to review the Iranian nuclear deal before congressional sanctions could be lifted. "The prospect of President Trump starting a catastrophic war should concern us all, and we must be vigilant in stopping it."

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Mr. Trump has been tougher on Iran than President Obama since the beginning of his presidency and that his latest comments were consistent with his approach to Tehran, which included pulling out of the nuclear deal last spring.

"The president's responding to Iran, and he's not going to allow them to continue to make threats against America," Mrs. Sanders said. "If anybody is inciting anything, look no further than to Iran."

Asked by reporters Monday afternoon whether he had any concerns about provoking tensions with Iran, Mr. Trump replied, "None at all."

Mr. Rouhani scoffed at Mr. Trump's threat to halt Iranian oil exports and said Iran has a dominant position in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping waterway. Washington later eased its stance, saying it might grant sanction waivers to some allies.

In reaction to Iran's threats, the U.S. military has renewed its pledge to secure free flow of oil from the strait. However, at least as of last week, the Pentagon said those Iranian threats had not led the U.S. military to reposition or add to forces in the Middle East.

"We haven't adjusted our force posture in response to any of those statements. And I don't think that's warranted. I wouldn't

recommend that," John Rood, undersecretary of defense for policy, told a security forum in Colorado on Friday.

James Jay Carafano, a national security specialist at The Heritage Foundation, said the president was expressing himself to Tehran "in a uniquely Trumpian manner."

"No one should doubt the U.S. resolve to protect its interests," Mr. Carafano said. "The president was not afraid to use force in Syria. Clearly, he would do so here, but only if provoked on the ground — he is not going to be cowed or impressed by threats from Tehran. On the other hand, he is not going to be reckless in the use of force, but I imagine if the Iranians thought about trying something, the tweet was a reminder they won't get away with it."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is bitterly opposed to Iran, praised Mr. Trump's "strong stance." Germany said threats of war were "never helpful."

With popular discontent over Iran's faltering economy and sliding currency, and the prospect of tough new U.S. sanctions, Iran's leaders have called for unity.

The Iranian rial plunged to a record low against the U.S. dollar on the unofficial market on Monday amid fears of military confrontation between Iran and the United States. The dollar was being offered for as much as 92,000 rials, compared with about 75,000 last week.

While Washington prepares to reimpose economic sanctions on Tehran after pulling out of the nuclear deal, Iran's faction-ridden religious and political elites have closed ranks against Mr. Trump's hawkish approach.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the administration will never stop calling out Iran for its human rights abuses, religious persecution and fomenting of terrorism.

"Sometimes it seems the world has become desensitized to the regime's authoritarianism at home and its campaigns of violence abroad, but the proud Iranian people are not staying silent about their government's many abuses," Mr. Pompeo said in a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California. "And the United States under President Trump will not stay silent either. In light of these protests and 40 years of regime tyranny, I have a message for the people of Iran: The United States hears you; the United States supports you; the United States is with you."

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Iran Accuses Trump Of Engaging In 'Psychological Warfare' With Bellicose Tweets (Boyer, WT)

Bolton confirms Trump won't tolerate any "negative" moves by Iran

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dave Boyer

White House National Security Adviser John R. Bolton said Monday that President Trump won't tolerate any "negative" actions by Iran, as the administration steps up its "maximum pressure" campaign on Tehran.

"I spoke to the President over the last several days, and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before," Mr. Bolton said in a statement issued by the White House.

His comment came after Mr. Trump tweeted a warning shortly before midnight Sunday to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani:

"NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!"

A high-ranking Iranian official responded Monday to Mr. Trump's warning of possible military action, saying the president "won't dare" launch an attack on Tehran.

Gen. Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar, chief of a paramilitary arm of the Revolutionary Guard, said Mr. Trump's threat of historic "consequences" for Iran are nothing more than "psychological warfare."

In comments reported by Iran's state-run ISNA news agency, Gen. Gheibparvar said Mr. Trump "won't dare" attack Iran.

Some Democrats in Congress reacted with alarm to Mr. Trump's comments.

"President Trump's belligerent tweet is another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war with Iran," said Sen. Tim Kaine, Virginia Democrat and a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Just months after the president backed out of the deal that prevented Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the administration's hostile rhetoric and efforts to stir up internal

protests against the regime are dangerous. The U.S. should continue to target Iran with tough sanctions, but we should not get pulled into another preventable war in the Middle East.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. is committed to “undertaking a diplomatic and financial pressure campaign to cut off the funds that the regime uses to enrich itself and support death and destruction.”

“We have an obligation to put maximum pressure on the regime’s ability to generate and move money, and we will do so,” Mr. Pompeo said Sunday night in a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California. “At the center of this campaign is the re-imposition of sanctions on Iran’s banking and energy sectors.”

Iranian lawmaker Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh told the Associated Press that believes a military confrontation between Iran and the U.S. is highly unlikely. He said Mr. Trump and Mr. Rouhani merely “express themselves through speeches since diplomatic channels are closed.” The two countries ended diplomatic relations in 1979.

The state-owned news agency belittled Mr. Trump’s warning tweet to Mr. Rouhani, describing it as a “passive reaction.”

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Iran Foreign Minister Tweets Back At Trump: ‘BE CAUTIOUS!’ (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hit back on Monday at threats from US President Donald Trump on Twitter, warning him to “BE CAUTIOUS!”

Mimicking Trump’s bellicose Twitter threat directed at Iran’s leaders the previous day, Zarif wrote: “UNIMPRESSED … We’ve been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!

Zarif was responding to Trump’s tweet on Sunday, in which he warned: “NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE.”

That was assumed to be a response to a speech by President Hassan Rouhani earlier in the day warning Washington not to “play with the lion’s tail” and that conflict with Iran would be the “mother of all wars”.

“The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago,” Zarif said of Trump’s tweet.

“And Iranians have heard them – albeit more civilised ones – for 40 yrs.”

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After Trump Slams Iran’s President, Iranian Officials Accuse Him Of ‘Psychological Warfare’ (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Iranian officials accused the White House of waging “psychological warfare” and vowed Monday to resist any U.S. efforts to destabilize their government, after stark warnings by President Trump’s against perceived Iranian threats.

The rapid backlash from Tehran marked some of the harshest exchanges between Iran’s leadership and Washington since the Trump administration exited the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May and moved to reimpose sanctions on Iran.

It also showed the widening gulf between the United States and other world powers that were part of the nuclear accord, which eased international economic pressures on Iran in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

European nations and others are now struggling to keep the nuclear accord alive and maintain economic ties with Iran.

The late-night missive from Trump was in response to earlier remarks from Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani, in which he said that war with Iran would be “the mother of all wars.” He also said the United States “must realize that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace,” Iran’s Tasnim News Agency reported.

Trump fired back in all capitals, saying that Iran would “SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE.”

“WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!” he wrote.

The saber-rattling caused Iran’s currency, the rial, to plunge to a record low against the dollar Monday, observers said.

The Trump administration has announced new efforts to try to undermine Iran's government, including social media messaging and a round-the-clock Persian-language broadcast channel.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the new initiative Sunday night during a speech to a crowd of Iranian Americans in California. In the past, U.S.-funded media efforts in Iran have had little impact and reached only a small audience.

The United States is also set to reimpose harsh sanctions after withdrawing from the nuclear deal with Iran and world powers earlier this year. That agreement, which was negotiated by the Obama administration, curbed elements of Iran's atomic energy program that raised proliferation concerns in exchange for an end to restrictions on Iran's oil exports and banking system.

But Trump has slammed the accord, calling it "the worst deal ever."

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qassemi, said Monday that Pompeo's speech, in which he likened Iran's rulers to the Mafia, "was hypocritical and absurd."

"These remarks are a clear example of [U.S.] interference in Iran's internal affairs," Tasnim quoted Qassemi as saying.

But the harshest words came from Iran's hard-liners, including Revolutionary Guard commanders.

"We will never abandon our revolutionary beliefs. We will resist pressure from enemies," the head of Iran's paramilitary Basij force, Brig. Gen. Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar, said Monday, the Reuters news agency reported. The comments were carried by the Iranian Students' News Agency.

"Trump cannot do a damn thing against Iran," he said. He dismissed Trump's salvos as "psychological warfare."

Another warning came from Mohsen Rezaei, chairman of Iran's Expediency Council, an advisory body to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

He said Trump is the one who should be cautious, warning that thousands of U.S. troops in the region are "under Iran's blade" — an apparent reference to Iranian proxy forces in places such as Iraq and Syria. The pro-Iranian groups also include Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has waged battles with Israel in the past.

Military experts have long warned that Iran could use such militias to attack U.S. troops in places such as Iraq and Syria. Skirmishes this year between Israel and the Revolutionary Guard and its proxies have already raised the specter of war.

Another military commander, Kiomars Heidari, reiterated late Sunday Iran's threat to block the Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway for about 30 percent of the world's oil tanker traffic, according to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

The strait "should either be safe for everybody or unsafe for everybody," Tasnim quoted Heidari as saying.

Some Iranians blamed the threat from Iran for causing the rial's collapse Monday, while others attributed the fall to Trump's tweet.

"The economy is a very complicated thing. Even Trump's caps lock can decrease the value of the rial," said an Iranian Twitter user using the handle @potanciel.

Twitter is blocked in Iran, and Iranians often use software to circumvent the ban. Many refrain from using their full names to avoid detection.

"Mr. Trump, don't talk with the most nervous people in the world with caps lock on," Tehran-based Hamid said on Twitter.

Others quipped that the fight between Rouhani and Trump was unfair because there are no capital letters in Persian.

Iran's government is now "looking for someone to write Rouhani's reaction in calligraphy," said U.S.-based author Siamak Mosulmani, referring to the ancient and artistic form of writing.

Speaking on "Fox & Friends" on Monday, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Iran is "inciting" tensions.

"The president has been very, very clear, again, since day one what his objectives are, and he's certainly not going to tolerate the leader of Iran making threats against Americans, making threats against this country, making threats against Israel," she said.

"This is a president who is going to stand up and make sure he is doing what is necessary. He's showing peace through strength. If needed, and steps are required, this president is not afraid to take them."

In Germany — one of the six nations that signed the nuclear deal with Iran — Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger called for "dialogue" rather than belligerence on all sides.

"We call on all sides to exercise restraint and rhetorical disarmament," he told reporters.

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Trump To Iranian President: ‘Never Ever Threaten’ U.S. Again, Or ‘Suffer Consequences’ (Hjelmgaard, Jackson, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Kim Hjelmgaard And David Jackson

Since taking office, President Donald Trump has developed a reputation for firing off heated tweets that seem to escalate disputes with world leaders at odds with the U.S.

On Monday, Trump trained his social media ire on Iran, prompting observers to wonder whether the president is seeking a confrontation with Iran or trying to change the subject politically.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders described Trump’s near-midnight tweet Sunday as a response to an Iranian threat and said, “If anybody’s inciting anything, look no further than to Iran.”

Asked by a reporter Monday afternoon if he had any worries about provoking tensions with Iran, Trump said “none at all” as he toured the Made in America exhibition on the White House South Lawn.

Ayatollah Amoli Larijani, Iran’s chief judiciary official, said the U.S. needed to know that if it attacked Iran, it would “receive a response that would be written in history,” according to comments carried by IRNA, a state-run news agency.

Larijani said Trump’s remarks were not unexpected from a “foolish person like Trump.”

John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, said he has spoken with Trump for “several days” about Iran, and the president “told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price that few countries have ever paid before.”

Foreign policy analysts wondered whether Trump was looking to move past a spate of political troubles, including fallout from last week’s meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, or is serious about confronting Iraq.

As Washington prepared to reimpose economic sanctions on Iran after its withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord, Trump ratcheted up tensions late Sunday night with a stark tweet written in all capital letters.

“NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKE OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE,” Trump wrote.

Trump was responding to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who said earlier in the day that “American(s) must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars.” Rouhani cautioned Trump to stop “playing with the lion’s tail or else you will regret it.”

Trump pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in May despite objections from China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom. The deal was intended to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon.

Trump ordered increased American sanctions after those sanctions had been suspended as part of the accord. The first part of the sanctions – affecting Iran’s access to U.S. dollars, its trade in gold and other commodities and its car industry – will snap back on Aug. 4. Sanctions on Iran’s oil industry will be reimposed in November.

Rouhani, a moderate in Iran’s theocracy that is ruled by Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has lashed out against Trump for threatening to reimpose the sanctions, for moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, and for banning travel to the U.S. from certain Muslim-majority countries.

Trump has suggested that because of Iran’s poor economy and what he has characterized as its increasing isolation, Iranian leaders are “going to call me and say ‘Let’s make a deal.’”

Iran has rejected talks.

Some analysts said Trump may be seeking a replay of his approach to North Korea. After months of attacking its leader, Kim Jong Un, and pledging to rain “fire and fury” on the North Korean leader if he kept up his nuclear threats, Trump suddenly agreed in the spring to a meeting with Kim last month.

Yet North Korea has not yet taken affirmative steps toward ending its nuclear weapons programs, analysts said, and an aggressive approach to Iran may not lead to much in the absence of the nuclear agreement.

Colin Kahl, national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden during the Obama administration, said Trump has “appeased” Russia and “gone soft” on North Korea while abandoning the Iran nuclear deal without a backup plan.

“Now the Administration is pushing regime change & the 2 sides are exchanging threats like this,” Kahl tweeted. “Very dangerous.”

Others noted that Trump’s threat to Iran came in a single tweet amid a series of posts defending his meeting with Putin and calling for an end to the special counsel investigation into Russian efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election on Trump’s behalf.

“He’s venting,” said Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator for presidents of both parties. “He wants to appear tough, and he wants to change the channel.”

Ned Price, a special assistant for national security during the Obama administration, said, “as with all things Trump, it’s impossible to know whether this is the result of strategy or impulsiveness.”

At least one thing is clear, he said: “What’s also undeniable is that the threat of conflict with Iran is much more real than it ever was with North Korea.”

Since taking office, Trump has developed a reputation for firing off heated tweets that seem to escalate disputes with leaders of nations at odds with the U.S. In the case of North Korea, the public war of words cooled quickly and led to the high-profile summit with Kim last month in Singapore.

“WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!,” Trump wrote in his latest verbal barrage against Iran.

On Sunday night, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo separately addressed a group of Iranian-Americans in California. Pompeo denounced Rouhani and Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Iran’s chief nuclear deal negotiator. He described them as “merely polished front men for (Khamenei’s) international con artistry.” He said the Iranian leadership resembles “the Mafia more than a government” and vowed to prevent Iran from exporting its oil to other countries.

“For 40 years the Iranian people have heard from their own government that America is the Great Satan. We do not believe they are interested in hearing that #FakeNews any longer,” Pompeo tweeted Monday.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qasemi, on Monday ridiculed Pompeo’s remarks, according to IRNA, the state-run news agency.

‘Pompeo’s words constituted very clear evidence showing the US efforts to meddle in Iran’s internal affairs,’ he said. ‘The hypocritical and absurd address made by the US secretary of state was just a propaganda move.’

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Trump’s All-Caps Threat Against Iran: Loud But Hardly Clear (Landler, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Mark Landler

President Trump’s vituperative tweet against Iran late on Sunday showed his determination to use the same approach that he took to engineer a diplomatic breakthrough with North Korea. But Mr. Trump’s top advisers are far more united in their hostility to engaging with Iran, and Iran is far less likely to bend to such pressure.

Mr. Trump’s threat that Iran would “suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before,” delivered before midnight in all capital letters, succeeded in changing the subject after a week of bad headlines about his meeting with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

But it only deepened questions about the long-term direction of Mr. Trump’s Iran policy. While the White House on Monday did not rule out direct talks between the president and Iran’s leaders over its nuclear program, Mr. Trump’s hawkish national security team has put the focus more on toppling the Iranian government than striking a new deal with it.

A few hours before Mr. Trump’s tweet, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo vowed in a speech that the United States would work with the Iranian people to undermine their clerical leaders, whom he described as “hypocritical holy men,” guilty of looting their country to enrich themselves and finance Islamist terrorism around the world.

The White House scrambled to lend a veneer of coordination to Mr. Trump’s outburst. Officials said it had come after consultations with the national security adviser, John R. Bolton, and in response to statements by Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani. A senior administration official said it augured a “more aggressive, comprehensive approach” to Iran.

Other people who know Mr. Trump said his decision to respond in such fiery terms was driven almost entirely by his search for a distraction from questions about Russia. Mr. Rouhani's words were hardly unusual, they noted: He warned the United States against the "mother of all wars" with Iran, but also opened the door to the "mother of all peace."

There was nothing in Mr. Trump's tweet to suggest he is looking to talk anytime soon. But his words carried a distinct echo of his threat last summer to North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, whom he said faced "fire, fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before."

Eight months later, Mr. Trump accepted Mr. Kim's invitation to meet, and after spending a few hours with him in Singapore, Mr. Trump declared that he and Mr. Kim had ended the nuclear crisis with North Korea. He has stuck to that assessment despite the fact that North Korea pledged to do nothing beyond what it has long promised, and that subsequent negotiations have bogged down in mutual recrimination.

When Mr. Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in May, he told aides and foreign leaders that his policy of maximum pressure had forced Mr. Kim to the bargaining table, and that a similar policy of overwhelming pressure would enable the United States to extract a better deal from Iran.

He has even taken credit for what he says are changes in Iran's behavior in the region since he pulled out of the deal — an assertion that baffles Iran experts, who say there is no evidence of changes in how Iranian is operating.

Experts and former officials who have negotiated with Iran listed at least three reasons Mr. Trump would find it difficult to replicate his North Korea breakthrough with Iran.

First, Iran's leadership is more complex and multifaceted than the one-man state of North Korea, making it harder for Tehran to reverse course like Mr. Kim did, and reach out to Mr. Trump.

Second, there are well-financed, powerful constituencies at home and abroad — like the Israeli government and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a Washington-based lobbying group — which will mobilize against any new diplomatic overture to Iran.

Third, Mr. Trump's unilateral decision to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal gives the Iranians little incentive to negotiate with the United States, especially since the other five signers — Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China — are still adhering to it.

"The bet they're making is that all those countries will knuckle under, and that Iran will come crawling back to the table," said Jake Sullivan, who took part in secret talks with Iran in 2012 as an aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that led to President Barack Obama's deal.

But Mr. Sullivan said the Trump administration had set an impossible standard for any successor agreement: that it settle all of Iran's other issues in the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen.

"Their entire strategy is the pressure itself, with the hope that it brings down the government," Mr. Sullivan said.

For more than a decade, Mr. Bolton advocated "the overthrow of the mullahs' regime in Tehran." But he recently told Voice of America that leadership change was "not the objective of the administration." Mr. Pompeo likewise stopped short of calling for regime change, though he did not mention diplomacy in his speech Sunday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif.

By contrast, Mr. Pompeo is heavily invested in diplomacy with North Korea, where, as C.I.A. director, he helped lay the groundwork for the Singapore summit meeting and, as secretary of state, has led the negotiations with Mr. Kim's subordinates. Mr. Bolton took a lower profile on North Korea, in part because he nearly sabotaged the meeting by declaring that the United States should use Libya as a model for ridding North Korea of its nuclear arsenal.

On Iran, however, Mr. Bolton has helped set the tone. On Monday morning, he issued a statement that was every bit as bellicose as Mr. Trump's, except for being in lowercase letters.

"I spoke to the president over the last several days," he said, "and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before."

Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said: "The endgame for Trump is different than it is for hawks like Bolton and Pompeo. Trump is much more interested in what comes out of it for him personally, in terms of a Nobel Peace Prize."

Even if Mr. Trump overcame the objections of his staff to pursue a diplomatic opening, experts said it was unlikely Iran would be receptive. His decision to pull out of the nuclear deal has strengthened the hand of hard-liners there. Leaders like Mr. Rouhani, who was once viewed as a moderate, have become more hawkish.

"The Iranians have a more complex political environment than North Korea," said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran expert and deputy director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution. "It's relatively easy for Kim Jong-un to turn on a dime and take advantage of an opportunity; it's much harder for them to turn on a dime."

Iran, Ms. Maloney noted, reacted relatively calmly to Mr. Trump's tweet. The country's leaders, she said, believe that the president is trying to bait them to breach the nuclear deal, which they do not want to do. But his threats are rattling the Iranians, who worry that Mr. Trump's aides might goad him into a confrontation.

"This is moving quickly," she said, "and the president has an establishment around him that seems eager for some kind of dust-up with Iran."

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Netanyahu Praises Trump's 'Tough Stand' Against Iran (Smith, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Mike Smith

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday praised President Donald Trump's "tough stand" against Iran after the US leader issued a stark warning to the Islamic republic.

Netanyahu's remarks came hours before a meeting with top Russian officials on Iran and the situation in Syria, where Moscow-backed regime forces have been battering rebels in the south for more than a month.

"I would like to praise the tough stand expressed yesterday by President Trump and Secretary of State (Mike) Pompeo against the aggression of the Iranian regime," Netanyahu said at the start of a cabinet meeting.

"Over the years, this regime has been spoiled by the major powers and it is good to see that the US is changing this unacceptable equation."

Iran is Israel's main enemy and Netanyahu has long pushed for a tougher stand against it by international powers. He has repeatedly lauded Trump's hawkish rhetoric towards Tehran.

Trump used Twitter on Sunday to send out an all-caps salvo: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had warned Trump on Sunday not to "play with the lion's tail," saying that conflict with Iran would be the "mother of all wars".

Trump's comments came after Pompeo, in a major address to the Iranian diaspora in California, said Washington was not afraid to sanction top-ranking leaders of the "nightmare" Iranian regime.

Netanyahu lobbied hard to have the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers cancelled, and Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in May.

All other parties to the deal – Russia, Britain, France, Germany and China – have sought to keep it in effect, saying it is working as intended by preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons for now.

Netanyahu has also pledged to keep Iran from entrenching itself militarily in neighbouring Syria, where Tehran is supporting President Bashar al-Assad in his country's civil war.

A series of strikes that have killed Iranians in Syria have been attributed to Israel.

– Russian visit –

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Moscow's military chief arrived in Israel later Monday for talks on Iran and the Syrian conflict.

Like Tehran, Moscow supports Assad in the war, but Netanyahu has held a series of talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in recent months on Syria and Iran.

Netanyahu said Putin recently requested the meeting with Lavrov and General Valery Gerasimov.

"I appreciated the words that were spoken by President Putin together with President Trump regarding the security of Israel during the recent summit," Netanyahu said after the meeting, in remarks relayed by his office.

The Russian foreign ministry said the meeting also addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and “the goal of ending the anti-terrorist operation in southern Syria, and ensuring security along the Israeli border”.

On June 19, Syrian government forces launched a Russia-backed offensive to retake Daraa and Quneitra provinces in the country’s south, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Regime forces have now regained control of most of the two provinces through a combination of deadly bombardment and Moscow-brokered surrender deals.

Israel is eager to obtain guarantees that Iranian forces and allied groups, such as Hezbollah, will be kept away from the Golan.

Separately on Sunday, Israel evacuated hundreds of White Helmets rescuers and their family members threatened by advancing Syrian regime forces to Jordan for resettlement in Western countries.

Jordan’s foreign ministry announced in a statement that the kingdom received 422 Syrian citizens, after earlier saying it had given permission for 800 to arrive.

Founded in 2013, the Syria Civil Defence, or White Helmets, is a network of first responders which rescues the wounded in the aftermath of air strikes, shelling or explosions in rebel-held territory.

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Rep. Jim Himes: Trump Threatening Iran For Political Points (Muñoz, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Gabriella Muñoz

Democrat Rep. Jim Himes suggested Monday that President Trump was going after Iran in order to rack up political points, after the president directed a fiery tweet at Iranian leader Hassan Rouhani.

During an interview on CNN’s “New Day,” the Connecticut congressman said Mr. Trump accused former President Barack Obama several times of wanting to use a war with Iran to rack up political points.

In November 2011, Mr. Trump did argue that Mr. Obama would start a war in order to get re-elected.

In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran. — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 29, 2011

“I think it’s an overstatement to say we’re at the brink of war,” Mr. Himes said.

However, the Democrat argued that Mr. Trump’s comments were geared to rally political support.

“We need to be very sensitive to the fact that this president, who doesn’t have a very sophisticated sense of international relations, regards war was a way to solve political problems,” he said.

Mr. Himes said the U.S. should avoid getting into a war with Iran like it did with Iraq. He argued it has been a “long time” since Americans were “really revulsed” by the effects of the Iraq war.

“So most people have forgotten what it’s like to open the newspaper every day and see four or five or six American names, who were killed in a Middle Eastern war,” he said, “and if Iraq was tough, wait until you try Iran.”

“I think it’s an overstatement to say we’re at the brink of war,” says Rep. @JAHimes in response to President Trump tweeting an explosive threat to Iran. “I think that’s probably not true.” <https://t.co/wUA3om4Wllpic.twitter.com/JdiJ5uwJax> — New Day (@NewDay) July 23, 2018

The president threatened Iran with “consequences, the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before.”

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS! — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

The tweet came in response to Mr. Rouhani warning Mr. Trump that hostility toward his country would incite “the mother of all wars,” according to a Reuters report.

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Hoyer Says Trump’s Iran Tweet Was ‘Unbecoming Of An American President’ (DeBonis, WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

By Mike DeBonis

House Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer said Monday that President Trump's bellicose tweet about Iran was "unbecoming of an American president" and called it an attempt to distract from his "essentially un-American" performance at last week's summit in Helsinki with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The blistering assessment by Hoyer (D-Md.) came in response to Trump's late-night warning Sunday to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani — in all capital letters — that Iran will face severe consequences if it threatens the United States again.

"He's weak on Putin, and he wants to prove he's tough on Rouhani," Hoyer said in an interview with The Washington Post. "It's a distraction. It's a distraction from the problems that he's having both with the awful, essentially un-American performance that he had in Helsinki, and I think this is just a way to sort of turn and beat his chest and say, 'I can be really tough on people,' and Rouhani and Iran are an easy target."

"As usual, the hyperbole he used was, in my opinion, unbecoming of an American president because the message it sends is not only of danger to Iran but danger to the global community," Hoyer added. "One of the better Republican presidents said speak softly and carry a big stick. Trump does the opposite."

Hoyer was referring to President Theodore Roosevelt.

Following a joint news conference last week with Putin in Helsinki, Trump was condemned by members of both parties for not confronting the Russian leader more aggressively about interference in the U.S. election in 2016.

In his tweet Sunday night about Iran, Trump warned Rouhani to "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Earlier Sunday, Rouhani said the United States should avoid inciting Iranians against the government, with the Trump administration poised to reimpose sanctions suspended under a 2015 nuclear deal that Trump withdrew from in May.

"America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said at a meeting of Iranian diplomats, according to Iran's state-owned Islamic Republic News Agency.

Other Democrats also stepped forward Monday to criticize Trump's tweet.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) told reporters in New Hampshire that such tweets "aggravate the situation."

"We have a definite challenge with Iran," Shaheen said. "I don't think the president's approach, creating foreign policy through tweet, is the right one. We need to have a strategy on Iran and how we approach them."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), meanwhile, said that Trump's rhetoric toward Iran was reminiscent of some of the language he previously used regarding North Korea.

"Reckless Iran rhetoric creates risks — especially if words are unbacked by actionable strategy," Blumenthal said on Twitter. "Remember N Korea, now continuing to build nuclear capability, despite 'fire & fury' & a failed summit. What is Trump's Iran strategy?"

Also on Twitter, an account maintained by Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee issued an all-caps tweet of its own, seeking to turn attention to Russian interference in the 2016 election.

"DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY ALL CAPS," said the tweet from the committee Democrats, led by Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.). "WE'RE NOT ATTACKING IRAN. BUT RUSSIA *DID* ATTACK OUR 2016 ELECTIONS TO HELP DONALD TRUMP, AND IS DOING SO AGAIN. TRUMP REFUSES TO HOLD RUSSIA ACCOUNTABLE AND SIDES WITH PUTIN OVER OUR INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY."

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Trump's War Of Words With Iran Shines Spotlight On Vital Oil Route (Dipaola, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Anthony Dipaola

The war of words between U.S. President Donald Trump and his counterpart in Iran over oil exports and sanctions is shining a

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spotlight on the narrow, twisting conduit for about 30 percent of the world's seaborne-traded crude.

The Middle East's biggest oil exporters rely on the Strait of Hormuz, the passage linking the Persian Gulf with global waterways, for the vast majority of their crude shipments – some 17.5 million barrels a day.

Should a regional conflict block that bottleneck, three of the largest Gulf Arab crude producers have pipeline networks that would potentially enable them to export as much as 4.1 million barrels via alternative outlets, according to Bloomberg calculations. Even so, this amount of oil, if sent by pipeline, would be less than a quarter of the total that typically sails on tankers through Hormuz.

Iran has renewed threats to block the Strait since the U.S. announced its plan to reimpose sanctions and cut shipments from OPEC's third-largest producer to zero from about 2.5 million barrels a day now. The U.S. president warned Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to "never, ever threaten the United States." Trump's tweet came hours after Rouhani warned the U.S. against endangering Iranian oil exports and called for improved relations with neighbors, including rival Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two of America's closest friends in the Middle East and geopolitical adversaries of Iran, both have pipeline networks that bypass Hormuz. Iraq has one operational pipeline to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean Sea. All four countries are members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and depend on the Strait to export their oil.

The total capacity of pipelines that could be used instead of Hormuz is about 7.1 million barrels a day, though some of that capacity is currently taken up by oil sent to export markets or domestic refineries. Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the capital of the U.A.E., are each using less than half of the respective pipeline capacities, while a link from northern Iraq is about two-thirds utilized, Bloomberg data show.

"Actual export capacity that avoids the Strait is limited," said Jaap Meijer, managing director and head of equity research at investment bank Arqaam Capital Ltd. in Dubai. Any attempt to close shipping lanes out of the Gulf and into Hormuz would likely cause oil prices to spike, he said.

Global benchmark Brent crude gained 0.9 percent to \$73.71 a barrel at 5:55 p.m. in Dubai.

State oil giant Saudi Arabian Oil Co., known as Aramco, can pump as much as 5 million barrels a day to the kingdom's Red Sea coast via the 1,200 kilometer (746-mile) East-West pipeline, built in the 1980s to transport crude from eastern fields located close to the Persian Gulf.

Aramco Exports

Aramco has exported an average of 650,000 barrels a day from the Red Sea port of Yanbu this year, according to ship-tracking data. The company also operates four refineries that can process as much as 1.4 million barrels a day. Supplies to the refineries and shipments to Yanbu indicate that Aramco is using at least 2.05 million barrels a day of capacity along the East-West pipeline.

Abu Dhabi, with about 6 percent of the world's crude, exports some of its oil through a 1.5 million barrel-a-day pipeline to the Indian Ocean port of Fujairah. The link spans some 400 kilometers from Abu Dhabi's desert oil fields and across the Hajar mountains to Fujairah, which lies outside the Strait of Hormuz. State-run Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. has exported 626,000 barrels of crude a day on average through the pipeline so far this year, according to ship-tracking data compiled by Bloomberg.

Iraq, OPEC's second-biggest producer after Saudi Arabia, pumps about 90 percent of its oil from fields in the country's south and ships it by tankers through the Gulf. The country can also supply mainly European buyers via a pipeline from northern fields to port of Ceyhan, Turkey.

It can pump about 600,000 barrels a day through this pipeline, which passes through and is controlled by Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The link currently exports at only about two-thirds of its capacity due to a dispute over oil revenue between Kurds and the federal government in Baghdad. Iraq is working to repair a separate pipeline from its northern fields that was put out of operation during fighting against Islamic State militants.

Iran, meanwhile, is seeking to ship its own oil from a port outside the Hormuz chokepoint. It aims to start crude exports from a planned terminal on the island of Jask, in the Gulf of Oman, in 2020.

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Trump's Strategy To Pressure Iran Relies On North Korea Playbook (Wadhams, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Nick Wadhams

Trump's late-night tweet warning of dire consequences if Iran threatens the U.S. highlighted the administration's confidence in a

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strategy the president credits with bringing North Korea to the negotiating table – a move he boasted is already paying dividends.

In an all-caps tweet on Sunday directed at President Hassan Rouhani, Trump said the U.S. won't tolerate Iran's "DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH" – a response to a warning that Iran's leader made to Trump. The tweet came hours after Secretary of State Michael Pompeo delivered a speech labeling Iranian leaders "hypocritical holy men" and calling out many by name for alleged corruption.

The stepped-up pressure comes about three months before U.S. sanctions snap back against countries that continue importing Iranian oil. U.S. officials reject suggestions that even close U.S. allies will end up getting broad exemptions to sanctions, saying governments must show they are significantly cutting crude imports to avoid penalties. In that way, Trump's tweet to Rouhani was also directed at reluctant U.S. allies in Europe and Asia.

Behind that effort, according to administration officials and analysts, is Trump's desire to goad Iran, which has seen repeated public protests over corruption and slow economic growth, back to the negotiating table to hammer out a new, more comprehensive deal to replace the nuclear accord the U.S. withdrew from in May.

Trump War of Words With Iran Shines Spotlight on Vital Oil Route

"The idea is to build up leverage and then explore opportunities to use that leverage," said Mark Dubowitz, the chief executive of the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies who has advised Pompeo. "The more the regime is being destabilized, the more leverage they have and the better the likelihood of a comprehensive deal on U.S. terms."

It may be working: Earlier this month, the other participants in the nuclear deal met in Vienna to look for ways to ensure Iran still gets the benefits it's seeking from the accord despite the U.S. threats. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called for "practical solutions" rather than "obscure promises." But world powers weren't able to offer concrete proposals, and diplomats have warned there may be little they can do.

'Fire and Fury'

It's no coincidence the administration is relying on the aggressive language that echoes Trump's approach to North Korea. Last year, Trump escalated his rhetoric, threatening "fire and fury" against the regime of Kim Jong Un and provoking fears of a military conflict that eased when the two leaders agreed to a historic summit. Trump has since claimed victory for defusing tensions.

"He's used this kind of tactic before with North Korea, he sees it as having succeeded and advantaged him," said Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution.

Trump and his top advisers, including Pompeo and son-in-law Jared Kushner, believe that the tough rhetoric against North Korea, coupled with the harsher sanctions regime, played a key role in what they say is Kim's willingness to give up his nuclear weapons. And despite few details, no timetable for denuclearizing North Korea and few signs of progress since the Trump-Kim meeting, the president has publicly maintained that his approach has paid off.

Administration Doubts

"A Rocket has not been launched by North Korea in 9 months," Trump tweeted on Monday morning. "Likewise, no Nuclear Tests. Japan is happy, all of Asia is happy."

But unlike isolated North Korea, whose nuclear program unified international opinion and led to tough United Nations Security Council sanctions backed by China and Russia, many countries do business with Iran and Trump's decision to quit the nuclear deal is still broadly criticized.

Another challenge Trump faces with Iran is that his own advisers seem dubious about the possibility of reaching a deal. In his own comments, Pompeo appealed directly to Iran's people and repeatedly called on Iran to stop its support for terrorism and become a "normal" country. He said Iran must make changes "that I don't see happening today, but I live in hope."

The proximate reason for Trump's tweet were remarks by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. America "must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said in a speech in Tehran on Sunday. As Iran has done in the past, Rouhani warned that Iran may be willing to disrupt oil passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

The Middle East's biggest oil exporters rely on the Strait of Hormuz, the passage linking the Persian Gulf with global waterways, for the vast majority of their crude shipments – some 17.5 million barrels a day. If the passageway were closed, pipeline networks could export less than a quarter of the total, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Rouhani's Anger

"He's angry" in the wake of the U.S. decision to quit the nuclear deal he championed, Fouad Izadi, a professor of American studies

at the University of Tehran, said of Rouhani. "He's put a lot of his own prestige on the line and it's not his fault that it's not working and that Trump decided to leave the nuclear agreement. So he was sending a signal that he's not the same Rouhani that he was a couple of years ago."

Trump responded with anger of his own.

In his Twitter post late Sunday, Trump said, "To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, tweeted back at Trump on Monday, scoffing in kind: "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them – albeit more civilized ones – for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Just a few hours before Trump's Sunday evening tweet, Pompeo personalized the administration's focus on Iran, calling out by name the head of Iran's judiciary, the minister of the interior and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself, stopping just short of a plea for regime change.

"These hypocritical holy men have devised all kinds of crooked schemes to become some of the wealthiest men on Earth while their people suffer," Pompeo said.

In a statement on Monday, National Security Adviser John Bolton sought to portray Trump's tweet as part of a broader, premeditated campaign to counter any acts of aggression by Iran, rather than threatening rhetoric alone. In his past role as a Fox News commentator and conservative scholar, Bolton openly advocated for military strikes against Iran and overthrow of the regime.

"I spoke to the President over the last several days, and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before," Bolton said in a statement released by the White House.

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Trump's Iran Saber-Rattling Dates Back Nearly 40 Years (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

President Trump is back to threatening nuclear powers again; this time, it's Iran. In a late-night, ALL-CAPS tweet Sunday, Trump issued his strongest threat to date against the country, whose nuclear deal the United States left this year.

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

But while it was his strongest threat as president, Trump has a long history of musing about war with Iran — dating back decades, in fact. And a lot of his past commentary has eerie parallels to today.

For much of the middle part of Barack Obama's presidency, Trump predicted that Obama would go to war with Iran in the name of winning reelection. But he has also outright talked about going to war there himself and even seemed to suggest it would be a legacy item if he ever became president.

Trump's commentary on Iran dates to the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, when he said the United States should have rescued the hostage by force. But he went even further, suggesting the United States should have toppled the regime and taken its oil.

"I absolutely feel that [the U.S. should have sent troops], yes," Trump told gossip columnist Rona Barrett in 1980. "I don't think there's any question, and there is no question in my mind. I think right now we'd be an oil-rich nation, and I believe that we should have done it, and I'm very disappointed that we didn't do it, and I don't think anybody would have held us in abeyance."

Trump added, "That would have been the easiest victory we would have ever won, in my opinion."

Trump in 2011 began floating his theory about Obama invading Iran — but he also suggested that he as president might do the same.

"I would never take the military card off the table, and it's possible that it will have to be used, because Iran cannot have nuclear weapons," Trump said in a November 2011 video from his office. "But you've got to exhaust other possibilities."

He even seemed to suggest in a 2011 interview with Bill O'Reilly that invading Iran might bolster his military credentials if he ever became president.

"Look, I am the strongest military person," Trump said, "and if I have Iran and won, I would be the strongest military president ever."

Trump in 2011 also said of a remote-control spying drone the Iranians captured that Obama should have "taken it out."

Why did @BarackObama let Iran keep our drone? Now it is going straight to the Chinese. He should have taken it out.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) December 12, 2011

In 2012, he said the United States could "blow them away to the Stone Age."

We should be able to negotiate a deal with Iran because they know we could blow them away to the Stone Age. They just don't believe we would.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 16, 2012

And in 2013, Trump floated invading Iran as an alternative to striking Syria. He also talked about threatening military force to rescue jailed Christian pastor Saeed Abedini.

While everyone is waiting and prepared for us to attack Syria, maybe we should knock the hell out of Iran and their nuclear capabilities?— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 5, 2013

Tell Iran to let our Christian Pastor go--and I mean right now. If they don't, there will be hell to pay.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 27, 2013

But most of Trump's commentary on this issue has to do with his bizarre — and ultimately disproved — theory that Obama was preparing to go to war with Iran for political purposes.

"Our president will start a war with Iran because he has absolutely no ability to negotiate," Trump said in a 2011 video blog. "He's weak and he's ineffective. So the only way he figures that he's going to get reelected — as sure as you're sitting there — is to start a war with Iran.

"So I believe that he will attack Iran sometime prior to the election, because he thinks that's the only way he can get elected. Isn't it pathetic?"

Trump tweeted about this relentlessly.

Just as I predicted, @BarackObama is preparing a possible attack on Iran right before November. <http://t.co/lSaJp1xo>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 3, 2012

Now that Obama's poll numbers are in tailspin — watch for him to launch a strike in Libya or Iran. He is desperate.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 9, 2012

@BarackObama will attack Iran in the not too distant future because it will help him win the election. If the... (cont) <http://t.co/WEJd30pR>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 14, 2011

In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 29, 2011

I always said @BarackObama will attack Iran, in some form, prior to the election.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 16, 2012

Remember what I said about @BarackObama attacking Iran before the election—I hope the Iranians are not so (cont) <http://t.co/0uQsm9t4>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) April 4, 2012

Don't let Obama play the Iran card in order to start a war in order to get elected—be careful Republicans!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 22, 2012

.@Israel could very well be close to attacking Iran. Could be this election's big October surprise...— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 16, 2012

When it didn't happen as he predicted before the 2012 election, Trump continued to wager that it would eventually happen — albeit for other political reasons.

Remember what I previously said—Obama will someday attack Iran in order to show how tough he is.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 25, 2013

I predict that President Obama will at some point attack Iran in order to save face!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 16, 2013

Remember that I predicted a long time ago that President Obama will attack Iran because of his inability to negotiate properly-not skilled!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 11, 2013

But despite repeatedly warning that Obama would get us stuck in a war with Iran, Trump as president has repeatedly rattled his own saber.

Within two weeks of his inauguration, in another tweet featuring some ALL CAPS, he suggestively put Iran “ON NOTICE.” The next day, he said Iran was “playing with fire.”

Iran has been formally PUT ON NOTICE for firing a ballistic missile. Should have been thankful for the terrible deal the U.S. made with them!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 2, 2017

Iran is playing with fire – they don’t appreciate how “kind” President Obama was to them. Not me!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 3, 2017

And early this year, he suggested that Americans might lend some undefined assistance to protesters of the Iranian government.

Such respect for the people of Iran as they try to take back their corrupt government. You will see great support from the United States at the appropriate time!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) January 3, 2018

It’s tempting to compare Trump’s Iran strategy to his “madman” North Korea strategy, given he pledged to “totally destroy” and inflict “fire and fury” upon Kim Jong Un’s regime before sitting down at the negotiating table. And perhaps this is a similar amount of posturing.

But it’s also worth noting that Trump has long spoken about war with Iran in pretty cavalier terms — and in ways that make lodging this threat midway through his first term somewhat difficult to completely dismiss as hot air.

In Iran, unlike North Korea:

1. Military options may look attractive to Trump.
2. Belief in administration that actively pushing for regime change is a good idea.
3. Obama pushed rapprochement.

In other words, much more likely to get escalation.— ian bremmer (@ianbremmer) July 23, 2018

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Should We Be Anticipating War With Iran? No, But It Could Get Nasty (Gladstone, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Rick Gladstone

The escalating invective between President Trump and Iran’s leaders, reminiscent of the president’s bombastic exchanges with North Korea, have raised fears of a military confrontation in the Persian Gulf — a vital conduit for global oil supplies — or perhaps even something bigger.

In a late-night Twitter message, Mr. Trump warned President Hassan Rouhani of Iran in all-capital letters of apocalyptic consequences if his country threatened the United States, increasing tensions to a new level. “BE CAUTIOUS!,” Mr. Trump wrote. Oil prices surged briefly on worries about potential supply disruptions.

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!

Many analysts of Iranian politics viewed Mr. Trump’s message as part of an intimidation gambit, more than an actual threat. Few said they were predicting a war between Iran and the United States, partly because Iran’s hierarchy is well aware that its forces are vastly outgunned by an American military that would have air and naval dominance. Still, nobody is ruling out an armed clash or another form of Iranian response, like a cyberattack, to send Mr. Trump a defiant message.

“I don’t think either side wants war,” said Cliff Kupchan, chairman of the Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy in Washington. However, Mr. Kupchan said, “the Iranians are playing with a different fish — this guy bites — and that means we’re entering a potentially escalatory phase, and that’s a real risk.”

Here are answers to some basic questions about the latest face-off between Iran and the United States:

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Mr. Trump's critics say he has surrounded himself with like-minded right-wing ideologues, most notably John R. Bolton, his national security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, his secretary of state, who would like to see regime change in Iran and were happy in May when he scrapped American participation in the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran negotiated by Mr. Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama.

Some political analysts say Mr. Trump believes his threats of escalation against Iran may force Iranian leaders to seek negotiations with him to address what he considered fatal flaws in the nuclear deal, in which Iran pledged to never acquire atomic bombs. Mr. Trump has repeatedly congratulated himself for — in his view — having successfully executed such a pressure strategy against North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, describing it as critical to Mr. Kim's decision to halt testing nuclear bombs and missiles and engage with Mr. Trump in a summit meeting last month in Singapore.

Relations with Iran have been combustible ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the American-backed shah. But the basis for the current spike in tensions lay at least in part in the 2016 election of Mr. Trump, who has embraced the position held by Israel and Saudi Arabia, America's closest Middle East allies, that Iran is an implacable enemy bent on becoming a nuclear-armed state.

In repudiating the 2015 nuclear agreement, Mr. Trump has reimposed and intensified nuclear-related economic sanctions on Iran, warning other countries to stop buying Iranian oil, the country's most important export, or risk economic penalties from the United States. He has included Iran on a list of mostly Muslim countries subject to an American travel ban. He has placed Iran's central bank governor on a terrorism blacklist. His administration has described Iran's clerical hierarchy as an irredeemably corrupt kleptocracy, and has cheered Iranians who have protested Iran's political repressions and increasingly dire economic problems.

The American threat to Iran's oil exports has hit a particular nerve in Iran's leadership, which has said it may close the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway to the Persian Gulf that accounts for up to 40 percent of oil tanker traffic, if Iran's oil sales are curtailed.

On Sunday, Mr. Rouhani told Iranian diplomats in Tehran that Mr. Trump risked "the mother of all wars" with Iran and admonished him not to "play with the lion's tail," which may have been the catalyst for the ferocity of Mr. Trump's Twitter response hours later.

Opinions about American relations with Iran are so polarized it is difficult to speculate. But analysts who have long studied Iran expressed strong doubts that its leaders would capitulate to American pressure.

"A regime that for 40 years has said 'Death to America' cannot, in the context of president Trump's aggressive policies, back down," said Houchang Hassan-Yari, a political-science professor at Queen's University and Royal Military College in Ontario, Canada. "They have to stand against the American position."

Others said the Trump administration might be underestimating the tenacity of the Iranian system, which has an extensive apparatus for quelling internal political threats. There is little sign that dissidents in Iran can do more than carry out scattered protests. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the paramilitary force that is intensely loyal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, wields enormous economic and political influence.

There is little question that the United States would prevail in a conventional war, an outcome not lost on the Iranians when the United States quickly toppled the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and routed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan.

Just judging by statistics, the conventional United States military dwarfs Iran's in every way. There are roughly 1.3 million active American military personnel, nearly triple that of Iran. Annual military spending by the United States exceeded \$600 billion last year, versus about \$16 billion in Iran. The Americans have nearly 6,000 tanks, versus fewer than 1,700 in Iran. The aerial and naval forces of the United States — more than 13,000 aircraft and nearly 300 battle vessels — vastly outnumber Iran's.

That does not mean Mr. Trump is ready to back his threats by invading Iran — such a possibility, on the contrary, is seen as nonexistent. Mr. Trump has said he wants to get the United States out of foreign military entanglements, and Americans have shown little appetite for another war.

"I don't see an actual war — it's not in anyone's interest," said Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based research group. "Trump doesn't even want to keep boots on the ground in Syria."

A possible point of conflict is the Strait of Hormuz, where speedboats of the Revolutionary Guards have occasionally harassed American Fifth Fleet warships that patrol the waterway. In an emailed advisory to clients, Mr. Kupchan said, "War is not imminent, but the probability of an escalatory incident in the Strait of Hormuz is increasing."

The strait has been the backdrop for violent confrontations before. In April 1988, United States naval forces sank three Iranian warships and destroyed two oil platforms after an American frigate was struck by an Iranian mine. Three months later, the American warship Vincennes fired missiles that downed a civilian Iranian jetliner that the Americans say they mistook for a warplane, killing 290 people aboard.

Some analysts speculated privately that Mr. Trump might be eager to avenge what he saw as an American humiliation in January of 2016 — a few days before the nuclear agreement took effect — when Revolutionary Guards seized 10 American sailors from two patrol boats and disseminated photos of them in captivity before they were released.

For their part, Iranian officials have shown no sign that Mr. Trump's latest Twitter threat has frightened them. Rather, some have treated it with sarcasm.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's American-educated foreign minister and a frequent Twitter user himself, offered this retort on Monday afternoon: "We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

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A Hail Mary Operation To Save White Helmet Volunteers In Syria (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The call came on Saturday night. In the raging war zone that is southwestern Syria, with enemy forces on the march, the 98 White Helmets volunteers brought their spouses, children and a personal bag each. A total of 421 people massed at two collection points where they were to make their crossing to safety.

By the time they crossed, they were 422. One woman went into labor, requiring an emergency C-section. Her son, Nairouz, came into the world in an open field under the darkness of night just short of the frontier with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It was just one moment of drama in a complicated international rescue operation to extract the Syrian volunteer rescuers who work in opposition areas through their country's bitter enemy Israel by bus to a temporary haven in Jordan.

It was a nail-biting trip to a crossing over one of the most tightly sealed frontiers in the world. Up until the last minute, those on the ground were uncertain the operation would go through.

Another nearly 400 people were meant to be pulled out as well. Most didn't make it in time to the assembly points, unable to go through roads that were closing fast by the advancing Syrian forces on one side and the expanding Islamic State militants on the other.

In all, it took about six hours to complete the evacuation, according to a person close to the operation who agreed to discuss the details on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

"It was a Hail Mary operation," said the person familiar with the evacuation. "The only place of safety was through their evacuation" to Jordan.

The operation was conceived by Britain, Germany and Canada and supported by Israel, Jordan, the United States, and the U.N. It took an unprecedented level of agreement and coordination — something international players have rarely demonstrated during eight years of war in Syria that have pitted world powers against one another.

The rescue of the besieged White Helmets was not without controversy.

It raised questions about the fate of 3,000 other White Helmets still operating in opposition-held northern Syria, living with other 1 million other displaced civilians in areas where the government is expected to target next.

The Syrian government denounced the evacuation as a "criminal process" that "smuggled terrorists" whom it blamed for undermining the country's security for years. A Syrian Foreign Ministry official repeated his government's accusations that the White Helmets staged and executed chemical attacks to blame Damascus.

The White Helmets is an organization of volunteers that since 2013 took on the task of rescuing the survivors and salvaging the dead in war-ravaged held areas, whether digging them from under the rubble of bombed buildings or pulling victims of chemical attacks from site. It has had Western backing and funding, and its work brought it a Nobel Prize nomination. The government waged a virulent campaign depicting them as agents and terrorists because its volunteers helped document atrocities by government forces and their allies.

In five years of operations, over 3,000 volunteers saved more than 115,000 lives, according to the White Helmets. The cost for the group has been high, with one in four of its volunteers wounded or killed.

The plan was conceived in Europe and Canada about two weeks ago.

The Syrian government offensive in the southwest, backed by Russia, unfolded in mid-June. Though it condemned the assault,

Washington, which along with Jordan had backed armed groups in the area and sponsored the White Helmets, signaled it wouldn't help stop the advances.

By early July, government forces began negotiating surrender deals with armed groups and civilians in villages and towns that were fast crumbling under the assault. The negotiations allowed those who refused to live under government control — whether armed fighters, civilians or activists — to evacuate to the north.

Except for the White Helmets, said the person close to the planning.

Government officials and Russian representatives said the White Helmets were "a red line" who should be "eradicated," the source said.

This threat was particularly acute, he said, because during previous evacuations from fallen opposition areas elsewhere, nearly a dozen White Helmets volunteers were specifically targeted, pulled from buses, tortured and filmed making false confessions about being paid agents. They were even filmed with weapons to support the government's narrative that they work closely with the armed groups.

"It was a pattern of behavior," he said.

The discussions about the White Helmets' safety started among Britain, Germany and Canada before the NATO summit on July 9. At the summit, there were leader-to-leader meetings over the issue.

Evacuating them through Jordan quickly became impossible as government forces advanced, seizing a vital border crossing from the rebels and then deploying along the border. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he agreed to let them cross through Israel, after an appeal from President Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Finding the volunteers in the fast-changing battlefield was a challenge. Conscious not to raise expectations, the planners only asked the volunteers whether they would accept an opportunity to evacuate through Israel.

Some declined, the source said, fearing they had no guarantees where they would end up. The leadership of the White Helmets was unanimous in accepting, despite the likelihood the government would point to the Israel route in propaganda against them.

"The political ramifications had to be secondary to saving what is to be saved," the source said.

There was an unexpected twist: advances by an affiliate of the Islamic State group. As rebel forces retreated and surrendered in many villages between Dara and Quneitra provinces, it was the Islamic State affiliate — not government forces — that moved in.

This changed the landscape again, blocking some escape routes to the evacuation points.

One civil defense volunteer said before Saturday night that many of his colleagues were locked in areas seized by the government and the militants.

"In our minds, there were no guarantees this evacuation was going to happen until it happened," the source said.

The small window was quickly closing. On Saturday night, the call came.

The evacuees congregated at two points in the northern end of the frontier.

Again, there was a problem.

A wife of one volunteer went into labor as the call was issued. "We were worried she won't make it," the source said.

An emergency C-section was performed on the Syrian side in a field near the frontier. "In a couple of hours, she was evacuated to the other side with a healthy baby boy" — Nairouz.

The evacuees crossed on foot and were received on the other side by Israeli soldiers, who verified their identities and took them in buses to one of the two crossings into Jordan.

"The rescuers were rescued," the source said.

Germany, Canada and Britain said they will resettle the White Helmets and their families within three months. The U.S. and Jordan will not take any in.

The planners are still in touch with the volunteers who didn't make it out, advising them on what to do and where to be safe.

It is unclear whether a similar operation can be produced. As for the hundred other volunteers in northern Syria, the source said the geography and landscape are different, with Turkish forces present in the area and far more options than the southwest, with firmly sealed frontiers from all sides.

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In a statement Monday night, the White Helmets thanked “all governments who contributed” to the evacuation and asked the international community — if it won’t act to end Syrian offensives — to “do more to help the hundreds of thousands remaining in southern Syria.”

But the international players appear unlikely to pull together that will again.

“A great many factors and partners had to interact in the right way,” German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said.

Pressed whether the action set a precedent for further world help in evacuations, he said: “The factors that made it possible in this case to help in this way people who faced an acute threat, a very specific group, cannot be reproduced at will.”

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Syrian President Receives South Ossetia Leader In Damascus (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad welcomed the head of Russia-backed breakaway region South Ossetia to Damascus on Monday, the presidency said, two months after recognising the region as separate from Georgia.

“Assad receives Anatoly Bibilov, the president of the Republic of South Ossetia, on a three-day visit,” the presidency announced in a statement.

Syria has been a close ally of Russia for decades, but bonds have grown since Moscow intervened militarily in 2015 to back Assad's troops in the country's civil war.

Assad said the “visit and South Ossetia's support for Syria in it protecting its sovereignty and unity confirm that Syria is right in looking towards the countries of the East”, the presidency said.

The latter “respect the basis and principles of international law, contrary to most of the West, which knows nothing except the politics of dictation”.

In May, Syria recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent from the former Soviet state of Georgia, prompting Tbilisi to cut diplomatic ties with Damascus.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are internationally recognised as part of Georgia, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but Russia and a handful of other countries recognise their independence.

Russia waged a brief war with Georgia in 2008 over the two regions and has stationed thousands of troops there.

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Russian FM Meets Netanyahu In Jerusalem Over Syria, Iran (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Jerusalem with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday in talks focusing on the Iranian presence in Syria.

Early in his meeting with the Russian delegation, also attended by Israeli defense officials, Netanyahu stressed the “extraordinarily important” link between the two countries, demonstrated by “the direct meetings between myself and President Putin and between our staffs.”

Netanyahu announced earlier at a Cabinet meeting that Russian President Vladimir Putin had a few days ago requested the meeting with the high level delegation that includes Russia's chief of the military's General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov.

Netanyahu said they were to discuss regional developments with “the situation in Syria being first and foremost.”

He said he would reiterate Israel's position that it expects Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Iranian-backed allies to honor the 1974 agreement which sets out a demilitarized zone along their shared frontier, and that Israel will continue to act to stop its archenemy Iran from establishing a permanent military presence in Syria.

Israeli media reported that the teams discussed a Russian proposal that would see any forces linked to Iran distanced some 100 kilometers (62 miles) away from the Golan Heights.

Israel's main concern is to keep Iran, which is fighting alongside the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad, as far away from its border as possible — along with its proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah and other militia.

Russia, a key Assad ally, has warned it would be unrealistic to expect Iran to fully withdraw from the country.

Monday's meeting comes about two weeks after Netanyahu and Putin discussed Syria and Iran in Moscow.

Hours before the meeting Israel activated a missile defense system against rockets from the fighting in Syria it believed were heading its way.

The incident came after Israel earlier this month, twice in the same week, fired a Patriot missile at an unmanned aircraft that approached the country's border from Syria.

In June, Israel fired a missile at a drone that approached its airspace near the Syrian frontier.

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Syria Blasts U.S., Israel For Evacuating 'Terrorist' White Helmet Rescuers (Bacon, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By John Bacon

The Syrian government of President Bashar Assad on Monday blasted Israel, the United States and other nations for evacuating hundreds of Syrian Civil Defense "White Helmet" rescue workers and their families from Assad's advancing forces.

The rescue was organized by Israel, which has otherwise avoided direct intervention in the brutal civil war ravaging its eastern neighbor.

"Words are not enough to express the discontent which the Syrians feel towards these mean conspiracies and the limitless support provided by the Western states, Israel and Jordan to the White Helmets ... and other terrorist organizations," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The White Helmets are lauded in the West, credited for saving thousands of civilians from the onslaught of Syrian troops and their allies driving Western-backed rebel groups from what were once rebel strongholds.

The search and rescue team has long claimed neutrality, but Syria, Russia and Iran dismiss the group as a propaganda arm of the rebels. Despite the evacuation effort, hundreds remain in Syria.

Assad's forces recently overwhelmed rebel areas bordering Jordan and Golan Heights, Syrian territory occupied by Israel.

"It is pretty clear that Assad is winning the Syrian civil war – decisively," said James Piazza, a Penn State professor and Middle East expert. "I think it is likely he will completely crush the rebels sooner rather than later."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said President Donald Trump, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and others requested Israel's assistance in the evacuations of "people who have saved lives and whose lives were in danger."

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt called the evacuations "fantastic news," and the Trump administration said it "deeply appreciates" Israel's role and Jordan's "generosity."

"We are glad that these brave volunteers, who have saved thousands of lives, are now out of harm's way," said State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert in a statement. "The White Helmets have consistently been targeted by the Assad regime."

She said the evacuees, more than half of whom are children, were allowed entry into Jordan temporarily. Plans call for the evacuees to be placed in "permanent homes" in Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom, Nauert said.

The civil war in Syria has dragged on for more than seven years, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and an unrelenting humanitarian crisis. A Syrian offensive that began last month has battered the few remaining rebel holdouts, and Assad continues to solidify gains and his power.

Netanyahu met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Jerusalem Monday. Israeli media said the prime minister pressed for, among other things, keeping pro-Iranian forces in Syria at least 60 miles from the Israeli border.

Russia's support has been key to Assad's survival and the all but certain defeat of the rebels. Piazza said Putin has made Syria the showpiece of its resurrection as a global superpower – and a player in the Middle East.

"It is hard to remember that at one time, in 2011, many policymakers and commentators regarded Assad as a dead man walking," Piazza said. "Assad's regime is in very good shape in terms of taking control over the remainder of the country."

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Syria Blasts Evacuation Of White Helmets As 'Criminal' (Issa, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Philip Issa

The Syrian government on Monday condemned a multilateral operation to evacuate hundreds of rescue workers from the war-torn country as a "criminal process" intended to de-stabilize Syria.

Syrian authorities have long described the Civil Defense search-and-rescue group, which are popularly known as the White Helmets, as a terror organization.

The group rose to prominence as it filmed its operations to rescue civilians from Syrian government airstrikes in the country's brutal civil war. The government has alleged the group stages videos. Damascus's ally Russia has accused the group of staging chemical weapons attacks on civilians and blaming them on the government, a charge that has never been proven.

On Saturday, more than 400 rescuers and their family members were evacuated from Syria's Quneitra province through Israel to Jordan, after the rebels surrendered the last areas they held in the southwestern province to the government.

Syria's foreign ministry called it a "smuggling operation" that was evidence of a Western conspiracy to overthrow the government. The White Helmets have financial backing from the U.S., Britain, and other nations.

The unprecedented operation was spearheaded by the U.S., Canada, and Britain, The Associated Press reported on Friday.

The rescuers and their families are expected to be resettled in Europe and Canada.

Germany's Interior Ministry confirmed on Monday that the country would give asylum to eight rescuers and 39 family members.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said on Sunday giving the rescue workers shelter "is a humanitarian obligation," adding that more than 250 White Helmets have been killed in the war since 2013. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was quoted as saying that "the efforts of the White Helmets deserve admiration and respect."

Germany has provided the group with 12 million euros (\$14 million) in funding since 2016.

Meanwhile, Jordanian government spokeswoman Jumana Ghunaimat said her country has not been asked to receive another group of White Helmets.

Ghunaimat also said Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, on Sunday discussed "preliminary ideas" about the possible return of Syrian refugees to their homeland, but that "we cannot talk about return while the crisis in Syria is not yet over."

"Jordan is willing and encouraging the return when tension calms down because the refugees constitute a heavy burden on the kingdom in the light of the international community's inability to cover the costs," she said.

More than 5 million people have fled Syria during its seven-year-long civil war, according to the U.N.

Last week, Russia's Defense Ministry said it proposed to the United States the creation of a joint group, along with Jordan, to organize refugee returns. The group would be linked to a U.S.-Russian-Jordanian center set up last year in Jordan for monitoring a cease-fire in southwest Syria, said Major-General Milkahil Mizintsev.

"Active progress in this direction is promoted by the agreements reached" last week by President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at their summit in Finland, he said Friday.

He added that "specific proposals have been sent to the American side for organizing work on the return of refugees to their places of permanent residence."

A similar operation would be established in Lebanon, he said.

Lebanon's National News Agency reported Monday that hundreds of refugees return to Syria from Lebanon. It is the latest in a string of returns this year. President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement party has put refugee returns near the top of its political agenda.

The National News Agency said 850 Syrians living around the border town of Arsal were repatriated on Monday.

Close to one million Syrians are registered with the U.N.'s refugee agency in Lebanon. The agency, the UNHCR, says it is not organizing returns to Syria. It says refugees should not be coerced into returning.

Also Monday, Israel said it fired a pair of missiles to intercept two missiles fired from Syria in Israel's direction. It said the Syrian missiles landed inside Syrian territory just short of the Golan Heights, which have been occupied by Israel since 1967.

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For Trapped Syrian Rescuers, An Elaborately Planned Escape (El Deeb, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Sarah El Deeb

The call came on Saturday night. In the raging war zone that is southwestern Syria, with enemy forces on the march, the 98 White Helmets volunteers brought their spouses, children and a personal bag each. A total of 421 people massed at two collection points where they were to make their crossing to safety.

By the time they crossed, they were 422. One woman went into labor, requiring an emergency C-section. Her son, Nairouz, came into the world in an open field under the darkness of night just short of the frontier with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It was just one moment of drama in a complicated international rescue operation to extract the Syrian volunteer rescuers who work in opposition areas through their country's bitter enemy Israel by bus to a temporary haven in Jordan.

It was a nail-biting trip to a crossing over one of the most tightly sealed frontiers in the world. Up until the last minute, those on the ground were uncertain the operation would go through.

Another nearly 400 people were meant to be pulled out as well. Most didn't make it in time to the assembly points, unable to go through roads that were closing fast by the advancing Syrian forces on one side and the expanding Islamic State militants on the other.

In all, it took about six hours to complete the evacuation, according to a person close to the operation who agreed to discuss the details on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

"It was a 'Hail Mary' operation," said the person familiar with the evacuation. "The only place of safety was through their evacuation" to Jordan.

The operation was conceived by Britain, Germany and Canada and supported by Israel, Jordan, the United States, and the U.N. It took an unprecedented level of agreement and coordination — something international players have rarely demonstrated during eight years of war in Syria that have pitted world powers against one another.

The rescue of the besieged White Helmets was not without controversy.

It raised questions about the fate of 3,000 other White Helmets still operating in opposition-held northern Syria, living with other 1 million other displaced civilians in areas where the government is expected to target next.

The Syrian government denounced the evacuation as a "criminal process" that "smuggled terrorists" whom it blamed for undermining the country's security for years. A Syrian Foreign Ministry official repeated his government's accusations that the White Helmets staged and executed chemical attacks to blame Damascus.

The White Helmets is an organization of volunteers that since 2013 took on the task of rescuing the survivors and salvaging the dead in war-ravaged held areas, whether digging them from under the rubble of bombed buildings or pulling victims of chemical attacks from site. It has had Western backing and funding, and its work brought it a Nobel Prize nomination. The government waged a virulent campaign depicting them as agents and terrorists because its volunteers helped document atrocities by government forces and their allies.

In five years of operations, over 3,000 volunteers saved more than 115,000 lives, according to the White Helmets. The cost for the group has been high, with one in four of its volunteers wounded or killed.

The plan was conceived in Europe and Canada about two weeks ago.

The Syrian government offensive in the southwest, backed by Russia, unfolded in mid-June. Though it condemned the assault,

Washington, which along with Jordan had backed armed groups in the area and sponsored the White Helmets, signaled it wouldn't help stop the advances.

By early July, government forces began negotiating surrender deals with armed groups and civilians in villages and towns that were fast crumbling under the assault. The negotiations allowed those who refused to live under government control — whether armed fighters, civilians or activists — to evacuate to the north.

Except for the White Helmets, said the person close to the planning.

Government officials and Russian representatives said the White Helmets were "a red line" who should be "eradicated," the source said.

This threat was particularly acute, he said, because during previous evacuations from fallen opposition areas elsewhere, nearly a dozen White Helmets volunteers were specifically targeted, pulled from buses, tortured and filmed making false confessions about being paid agents. They were even filmed with weapons to support the government's narrative they work closely with the armed groups.

"It was a pattern of behavior," he said.

The discussions about the White Helmets' safety started between Britain, Germany and Canada before the NATO summit on July 9. At the summit, there were leader-to-leader meetings over the issue.

Evacuating them through Jordan quickly became impossible as government forces advanced, seizing a vital border crossing from the rebels and then deploying along the border. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he agreed to let them cross through Israel, after an appeal from U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Finding where the volunteers were in the fast-changing battlefield was a challenge. Conscious not to raise expectations, the planners only asked the volunteers whether they would accept an opportunity to evacuate through Israel.

Some declined, the source said, fearing they had no guarantees where they would end up. The leadership of the White Helmets was unanimous in accepting, despite the likelihood the government would point to the Israel route in propaganda against them.

"The political ramifications had to be secondary to saving what is to be saved," the source said.

There was an unexpected twist: Advances by an affiliate of the Islamic State group. As rebel forces retreated and surrendered in many villages between Daraa and Quneitra provinces, it was the IS affiliate — not government forces — that moved in.

This changed the landscape again, blocking some escape routes to the evacuation points.

One civil defense volunteer said before Saturday night that many of his colleagues were locked in areas seized by the government and the militants.

"In our minds, there were no guarantees this evacuation was going to happen until it happened," the source said.

The small window was quickly closing. On the night of July 21, the call came.

The evacuees congregated at two points in the northern end of the frontier.

Again, there was a problem.

A wife of one volunteer went into labor as the call was issued. "We were worried she won't make it," the source said.

An emergency C-section was performed on the Syrian side in a field near the frontier. "In a couple of hours, she was evacuated to the other side with a healthy baby boy" — Nairouz.

The evacuees crossed on foot and were received on the other side by Israeli soldiers, who verified their identities and took them in buses to one of the two crossings into Jordan.

"The rescuers were rescued," the source said.

Germany, Canada and Britain said they will resettle the White Helmets and their families within three months. The U.S. and Jordan will not take any in.

The planners are still in touch with the volunteers who didn't make it out, advising them on what to do and where to be safe.

It is unclear if a similar operation can be reproduced. As for the hundred other volunteers in northern Syria, the source said the geography and landscape are different, with Turkish forces present in the area and far more options than the southwest, with firmly sealed frontiers from all sides.

In a statement Monday night, the White Helmets thanked “all governments who contributed” to the evacuation and asked the international community — if it won’t act to end Syrian offensives — to “do more to help the hundreds of thousands remaining in southern Syria.”

But the international players appear unlikely to pull together that will again.

“A great many factors and partners had to interact in the right way,” German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said.

Pressed whether the action set a precedent for further world help in evacuations, he said: “The factors that made it possible in this case to help in this way people who faced an acute threat, a very specific group, cannot be reproduced at will.”

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Hundreds Of Rescuers Still Stuck In South Syria After Evacuation (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Several hundred Syrian rescuers remain trapped in the country’s south with no escape from approaching regime troops, two of them said Monday after a secret evacuation saved many of their colleagues.

Israel on Sunday helped more than 400 people – opposition-linked White Helmet rescue workers and their families – flee a neighbouring pocket of southwestern Syria as government forces bore down on them.

They were then taken to Jordan and will be resettled to western nations including France, Britain, Germany, and Canada.

“It was the only alternative for our trapped volunteers who would otherwise have faced detention or death at the hands of the Syrian regime and its ally Russia,” the group said on Monday.

Ninety-eight male and female White Helmet volunteers were able to escape to Jordan with 324 members of their families, it said in a statement.

But a similar number remain trapped in southern Syria.

“We’re calling on concerned parties to help us leave,” said Cesar, a 23-year-old White Helmets worker in the southern city of Daraa.

He estimated some 400 fellow rescuers were still in the provinces of Daraa, bordering Jordan, and Quneitra, next to the buffer zone abutting the Israeli-annexed Golan.

Cesar said he had learned of the operation a few days ago “by chance”, but when he contacted White Helmets leadership, they told him it was too late to register to leave.

– ‘Made things worse’ –

“They set another meeting for today on the subject, but we found out a little while ago that the efforts failed. The fact that some White Helmets members left and some stayed hurt us more than it helped us,” he told AFP on Monday.

“Yesterday’s evacuation through Israel only made things worse. We’re afraid of the regime and Russia’s reactions.”

Russian-backed Syrian forces have been battering the south for more than a month in a bid to bring it back under government control.

The military push has damaged hospitals and civil defence centres, pushing hundreds of thousands to flee towards the Jordanian and Israeli borders, which remained sealed.

The foreign ministry in Damascus slammed the evacuation on Monday, calling it a “criminal operation” and repeating its accusation that the White Helmets were a front for “terrorists”.

Moscow said it was “symbolic that the White Helmets preferred to flee Syria thanks to foreign support, thus revealing their true nature”.

The 422 people evacuated will be allowed to stay in Jordan for three months before being resettled, Amman has said.

On Monday, the White Helmets called on the international community to help those left behind in southern Syria.

“We thank all governments who contributed to the success of this operation to rescue the rescuers, and we ask that they do more to help the hundreds of thousands remaining in southern Syria,” they said.

– ‘We’re surrounded’ –

White Helmets chief Raed Saleh said not all workers had been evacuated because some had not signed up to do so, while “some volunteers were not able to reach the evacuation point”.

He said there were no plans for a second such operation.

“They pulled out the others but can’t get us out?” asked 20-year-old rescuer Imad from a rebel village in Quneitra.

“We’re surrounded,” he said.

Imad also said there had been a meeting of White Helmets officials in Jordan on Monday to discuss the fate of the remaining rescuers.

After the meeting, the White Helmets members still in Syria were told their only option was to be bussed north to opposition-controlled territory under a surrender deal.

Last week, rebels in Quneitra agreed with Russia to give up their remaining territory in the province in exchange for an end to bombardment and safe passage to other rebel-held territory.

The terms are similar to previous deals that have brought swathes of Syria under government control.

But Imad told AFP he feared reprisals.

“We’re a burnt card when it comes to the Syrian army – there won’t be any mercy. Whoever the regime gets its hands on is lost, and no one knows what ends up happening to them,” he said.

Founded in 2013, the Syria Civil Defence, or White Helmets, works to rescue those wounded by attacks in rebel-held territory.

The group receives funding from a number of Western governments and individual donors.

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After Painful Search, Syrians Learn Detained Relatives Are Long Dead (Gebeily, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Maya Gebeily

“That’s it? You’re sure he’s dead?” Seven years had passed with no news, but Salwa could hardly believe her nephew, a Syrian activist arrested in 2011, had been dead the last five.

That’s what the civil records employee in Salwa’s native Hama, a central government-held city, declared last month after shuffling through papers at her desk.

“She told me, ‘Yes, we received the names of everyone who died inside’ prison, Salwa told AFP, using a pseudonym because she fears reprisals in regime territory.

Tens of thousands of people are estimated to be held in government jails across Syria, with relatives and advocates saying they are often tortured, denied fair trial, and deprived contact with families.

Their relatives are left in limbo, spending years and precious savings shuttling between security services to know where loved ones are held or if they’re even alive.

Now, activists and families of imprisoned Syrians say authorities have quietly updated civil records to mark detainees as “deceased”, backdating deaths to as long ago as 2013.

Hearing of this through word of mouth, families of detained Syrians are flooding registries to ask: “Are they alive?”.

For around 400 detainees in recent months, the answer has been “no”, said Fadel Abdul Ghany, head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

The SNHR estimates 80,000 Syrians remain forcibly disappeared by the government.

“Before, the regime was giving no details on the detained. It wouldn’t declare them dead,” Abdul Ghany told AFP.

“Now it is, but in a barbaric way.”

– ‘Scorched our hearts’ –

Hama's records were updated first, followed by Homs, the capital Damascus, Latakia and Hasakeh, and new names are still arriving at registries, the SNHR said.

In seven years of documenting Syria's uprising-turned-war, Abdul Ghany said he had never before seen families learn of the fate of the detainees in this way.

"Usually, you take a death certificate to the registry and inform them your relative is dead, not the other way around," he said.

On that June morning, Salwa and her sister-in-law worried they'd be the only people at the registry asking about imprisoned relatives.

"But when we got there, we saw a line out the door," she said.

"Most were women, mothers and sisters of detainees. Security forces stood among them, and every single woman was wiping her tears and covering her face with her scarf."

Weeping, Salwa went home to hold a single day of hushed condolences for two nephews: Saad, arrested in 2011 and marked deceased in 2013, and Saeed, detained since 2012 and recorded to have died last year.

The family had no bodies to bury and was afraid of grieving publicly in a regime-held city.

"They scorched our hearts – those two boys were like roses. Even in mourning, we're afraid and hide our grief," Salwa said.

– 'No going back' –

The last time Islam Dabbas's family saw him was late 2012, behind bars at a regime prison near Damascus.

"He wore a sweater that read 'Just Freedom'. We stopped hearing anything a while after that," recalled his brother Abdulrahman, who has since moved to Egypt.

This month, a relative still in Syria learned of the updated files and checked Islam's.

"It said he died January 15, 2013 in Saydnaya," Abdulrahman said.

Amnesty International has dubbed the infamous prison "the human slaughterhouse", after reports of mass executions there.

"Honestly, it's a relief. My mother told me, 'He's lucky. He's at peace,'" Abdulrahman said.

They held condolences for Islam last week in Egypt, hundreds of kilometres (miles) from home and without a body.

Abdulrahman and his mother then broke the news by phone to his father, still in Syria serving out his own prison sentence.

But confirming what many long suspected is not enough, said Noura Ghazi, a Syrian lawyer and member of the detainee advocacy group Families for Freedom.

"OK, you've told us they're dead, but we want to know where the bodies are. We want to know the real way they died," Ghazi said.

Others are hesitating.

"People are so tired. Of course there's denial. Others are suspicious, saying 'Why would we believe this document is real? Or this date to be true?'" said Ghazi, who lives in Beirut.

Her husband, activist Bassel Khartabil, vanished after his October 3, 2015 arrest. In 2017, through her networks, Ghazi confirmed he died in regime detention.

"I held condolences for him, I wore black. I thought I had processed the truth," she said.

That changed when a relative of Khartabil visited a Damascus registry in early July and saw the government's freshly-recorded date of death: October 5, 2015.

"When we saw that, it's like he died all over again," said Ghazi.

"There's no going back. For more than two years I fought to know his fate. Now I'll be fighting my whole life to get his body."

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Debate Over Surrogacy Draws Tens Of Thousands Of Israelis Into The Streets (Tarnopolsky, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

CWASHAR0000801

By Noga Tarnopolsky

In an extraordinary public protest, tens of thousands of Israelis poured into the streets across the country Sunday to voice their displeasure with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Shame! Shame!” they shouted.

The issue was not Gaza policy or the controversial nation-state law favoring Jews over Arabs. It was the government’s refusal to pay for single men or gay male couples to have children using surrogates.

Israel’s welfare system has long paid for surrogacy for single women and married heterosexual couples who are unable to have children on their own. Typically, an embryo created through in vitro fertilization is implanted in a woman who then carries the fetus to term.

Last Monday, Netanyahu announced that he’d support an amendment extending state subsidies for surrogacy to single men and gay couples — a move that apparently upset religious conservatives in his fragile coalition government.

Two days later in the parliament, or Knesset, he voted against it without explanation, and the amendment narrowly failed.

The protest began the same day, as members of the LGBTQ communities in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem gathered spontaneously to demonstrate. By Thursday, technology companies that have sustained Israel’s reputation as the “start-up nation” had joined the cause.

Microsoft’s Israel affiliate announced that it would pay 60,000 shekels, about \$16,500, for any gay employee to use a surrogate.

“My heart is with each and every employee in their desire to create a family,” said Assaf Rappaport, the chief executive of Microsoft’s research and development center in Israel.

IBM issued a statement Friday decrying the law: “No one should be denied one of the most basic human rights — the right to start a family — for being who they are. We support IBMers who wish to stand in solidarity with the LGBT community in advocating for legislation that is inclusive of ALL.”

Dozens of other companies agreed to give their employees the day off on Sunday — normally a workday here — to protest. In Jerusalem, dozens of protesters blocked the square facing the prime minister’s residence. In Haifa, protesters showed up with empty strollers.

A few hours before the start of Sunday’s nationwide protests, Apple Inc. released a statement supporting the Israeli campaign.

“One of Israel’s greatest gifts is the creativity, diversity and talent of all of its people,” it said. “Unfortunately, recent legislation passed by the Knesset undermines those values. Apple will always maintain its values of fairness, dignity, and mutual respect, and we stand with all of our employees seeking equality under the law.”

Even trade unions, which are traditionally conservative, granted their employees a day off, causing some delays at the national electric company and Ben Gurion International Airport.

Marching alongside thousands of protesters, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai said, “These people are protesting for something so basic, just human rights, against a government and a prime minister who misleads us. This is apparently the moment when the straw broke the camel’s back. There is an awakening.”

Around him, marchers chanted, “Netanyahu! Homophobe! We are here, we are everywhere!”

The protest there morphed into a general outcry against several conservative laws passed last week before the start of a three-month summer recess. The most controversial was the nation-state law, which defines Israel as “the national home of the Jewish people” and downgrades Arabic from an official language to one with an undefined “special status.”

As the magnitude of Sunday’s protests became clear, senior Israeli officials began to signal the possibility of reversing course.

Minister of Culture Miri Regev, who voted against the amendment that would have paid for surrogacy for gay men, said in a television interview that the government would review the law.

“We mucked up with surrogacy,” she said. “I regret that coalition obligations forced us to do so.”

Netanyahu told gay rights leaders he would meet with them “in the coming days.”

Itzik Shmuli, an opposition legislator who is gay, said the prime minister was “treating us as second-class citizens.”

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Israel's Only Goods Crossing With Gaza To Partially Reopen (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

Israel will partially reopen its only goods crossing with the blockaded Gaza Strip later Tuesday, a minister said, after closing it July 9 over border tensions and kites carrying firebombs to burn Israeli farmland.

"Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman decided that Kerem Shalom will partially reopen and as of today at 12:00 pm (0900 GMT) it will be possible to transfer gas and fuel into the Gaza Strip, in addition to food and medicine," Lieberman's office said.

The statement noted that the number of kites and balloons carrying firebombs into Israeli territory had been reduced but not totally eliminated.

It said the crossing could return to full activity soon "conditioned on the full cessation of fire-balloon launches and friction on the fence."

Israel says the devices have sparked hundreds of fires since April and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage.

Palestinians in Gaza see the kites and balloons as legitimate resistance against Israel's more than 10-year blockade.

The partial reopening follows urgent warnings from United Nations officials that emergency fuel supplies are running low in the Gaza Strip and that the shortage is starting to affect hospitals and water sanitation.

The coastal enclave suffers from a severe lack of electricity and relies on fuel-powered generators during outages that last hours at a time.

Israel and Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip, reached a ceasefire at the weekend following a major flare-up of violence on Friday.

Israel had carried out a wave of air strikes killing three Hamas militants after one of its soldiers was shot dead along the Gaza border.

There have been months of tension along the border, where mass protests and clashes began on March 30 and have continued at varying levels since then.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008.

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UN Rights Chief Sharply Criticizes Israel Over Gaza Killings (Lederer, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Edith M. Lederer

The U.N. human rights chief sharply criticized Israel on Monday, calling recent killings by its soldiers during Palestinian demonstrations along the Gaza border fence "shocking" and saying living conditions inflicted by Israel's 11-year blockade of the territory are "grossly inadequate."

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a video address to the U.N. Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People that the situation in Gaza has escalated dramatically in recent months with "the potential to generate threats to peace across a far broader region."

Zeid, who heads the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said it is essential for all parties to cooperate with the independent, international commission of inquiry into the recent deadly events in Gaza that his office is helping to establish. It was authorized by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council on May 18 "to advance accountability" for the killings and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, he said.

Zeid said there are "serious concerns" that Israeli accountability mechanisms don't comply with international standards of "independence, impartiality, and effectiveness."

"Very few investigations ever occur," he said. "In the rare cases where an investigation has led to an indictment, the sentence has been extremely lenient in light of the gravity of the crime committed."

Zeid said it is vital to address the root causes of the Gaza demonstrations, which have resulted in the deaths of over 100 Palestinians, including 17 children, and the wounding of more than 4,100 others with live ammunition since March 30.

CWASHAR0000803

In addition to “grossly inadequate living conditions” caused by Israel’s blockade for the residents of Gaza, most of whom are refugees, restrictive measures have also been imposed by Egypt that have “exacerbated these conditions,” Zeid said.

He added that the situation in Gaza may be “severely aggravated” in the coming months by the financial crisis facing the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, as a result of dramatic cuts to its budget by the Trump administration.

Zeid criticized last week’s approval by Israel’s parliament of a bill defining that country as the nation-state of the Jewish people. He said that it “anchors inherent discrimination against non-Jewish communities,” most notably the Arab citizens of Israel and residents of occupied East Jerusalem. He warned that it “could also further inflame tensions.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the bill’s passage a “historic moment in the history of Zionism and the history of the state of Israel,” saying: “Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, which honors the individual rights of all its citizens.”

Zeid also criticized Israel’s approval, planning and construction of settlements across with West Bank and East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future state.

He called Israel’s detention of hundreds of Palestinian children, some without charge, under a system of “administrative detention,” a “fundamental human rights violation.”

“It should be absolutely clear that international law requires detention only be used for children as a last resort,” he said.

And whether for children or adults, Zeid said, detention without trial “contravenes Israel’s obligations under international law.”

“An estimated 440 Palestinians are being held in ‘administrative detention,’ according to the latest figures,” he said. “Israel should immediately charge, or release, all of them.”

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UN Rights Chief Calls Out Israel Over Detained Palestinian Kids (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

The United Nations rights chief on Monday demanded that Israel either give more than 400 detained Palestinian children their day in court or release them, decrying “assaults” on Palestinians’ rights.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein criticized the “administrative detention” system under which Israel is currently holding an estimated 440 children.

“Israel should immediately charge, or release, all of them,” the Geneva-based Zeid said via videolink, calling Israel’s system a “fundamental human rights violation.”

“It should be absolutely clear that international law requires detention only be used for children as a last resort,” he said.

“And whether for children or for adults, detention without trial, on evidence that is often kept secret, under often indefinitely renewable administrative detention orders, contravenes Israel’s obligations under international law, and must come to an end.”

The meeting focused on recent violence in the Gaza Strip, which is to the UN Security Council is set to take up Tuesday during a regular monthly session on the Middle East.

Zeid also criticized what he called Israel’s arbitrary detention and arrest of rights activists.

The Gaza Strip, controlled by Islamist movement Hamas, has been under an Israeli blockade for more than 10 years.

But since late March, that blockade has sparked a vast protest movement along the border with Israel that has left at least 149 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier dead.

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Western Wall Stone Crashes Down In Jerusalem (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Jerusalem authorities restricted access to one of Judaism’s holiest sites on Monday after a massive stone block from the Western Wall fell to the ground below, narrowly missing a worshipper.

"The stone, weighing 100 kilogrammes (220 pounds), fell close to a woman who was praying... without hitting her," Mayor Nir Barkat said in a statement.

He said the fact that nobody was harmed in the incident was "a great miracle".

Barkat visited the scene with Jerusalem's city engineer and safety officials, who declared the spot dangerous and closed it to the public pending further inspection.

Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz said he could not explain the incident but the fact it happened a day after a major gathering at the Western Wall called for "soul-searching".

On Sunday, tens of thousands of Jewish worshippers thronged the main, gender-segregated Western Wall esplanade for annual prayers mourning the razing of the Jews' biblical-era temples.

Monday's incident struck a less-visited part of the wall, where men and women are permitted to pray together contrary to Orthodox Jewish practise.

Rabinowitz noted that the stones above the main prayer section of the Western Wall are examined by professionals twice a year.

The Western Wall, in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, is the holiest place at which Jews are allowed to pray.

They believe it is what remains of a supporting wall of their biblical second temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

Immediately above it is the flashpoint shrine known to Jews as the Temple Mount, the holiest in Judaism, revered as the spot where the two biblical Jewish temples once stood.

To Muslims it is the Haram al-Sharif compound, the third-holiest in Islam after Mecca and Medina, and home to the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

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Gunmen Attack Government Building In Northern Iraq (Coles, Nabhan, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Isabel Coles And Ali Nabhan

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Qatar To Upgrade Air Base Used By U.S. To Fight Terrorism (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Qatar will spend \$1.8 billion upgrading the major air base used by the United States for its ongoing military and counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf kingdom said Monday.

Expansion of the base, which houses about 10,000 U.S. military personnel, will include new family housing facilities for more than 200 officers and other infrastructure enlargements, along with "operational" improvements, Defense Minister Khaled Mohammed al-Attiyah said in an interview.

The improvements, to be formally announced at a groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday, were previewed this year in meetings between Attiyah and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. They come as Qatar and its gulf rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are in the midst of a deep regional dispute and competing for closer relations with the United States.

Last summer, fresh from a triumphant visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump sided with the Saudis and Emiratis when they broke relations with Qatar and accused it of ties to terrorism. By fall, however, Trump backed off after Mattis and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that it was unwise to take sides in what was a long-standing rivalry, and reminded him of U.S. military interests in Qatar.

Since then, he has repeatedly called on them to mend their differences and offered to mediate. Last April, when Trump hosted a visit by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar was described as a "valued partner and longtime friend" that provided "critical support" for operations against the Islamic State.

Qatar is also viewed as a major donor to administration plans to provide development assistance to Gaza and the West Bank as part of a still-unrevealed U.S. plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar is a major customer for the U.S. defense industry, including last year's purchase of \$12 billion worth of F-15s. "We have bought a lot of military equipment from the U.S. so we can fly hand in hand with our partners," Attiya said.

He dismissed any notion of regional rivalry, saying that Qatar is "not very much interested in rivalry" but rather was interested in "the stability of the region."

According to a background statement from the Qatar government, the contract for 36 F-15 fighter jets "supports 50,000 total jobs and more than 550 suppliers in 42 states." Other recent purchases include \$20 million worth of Javelin guided missiles, \$700 million in logistics support services and equipment, and an estimated \$200 million in weapons systems "which support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States."

But the centerpiece of U.S.-Qatar ties is Al Udeid Air Base, home to scores of aircraft, including fighters, bombers, tankers and reconnaissance planes.

The base is key to U.S. military efforts in the Middle East and has played a central role in the Pentagon's air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In addition to the large U.S. troop presence, it is also the headquarters of Air Forces Central Command, headed by a three-star U.S. general, and a combined air operations center from which the Pentagon tracks the maneuvers of aircraft throughout the region.

The U.S. military relationship with Qatar expanded rapidly in the 1990s and early part of the 21st century, as the Qataris built Al Udeid and encouraged the United States to use it. The Pentagon moved its air operations center there from Saudi Arabia in 2003, after Riyadh denied the United States permission to use its Prince Sultan Air Base to attack Iraq.

Qatar's willingness to let the United States fly bombers from Al Udeid is seen as particularly significant. Other nations in the region do not allow bombers, but the Pentagon has had a steady rotation of bomber squadrons through the base. A unit of B-1B bombers arrived this spring, replacing B-52s that carried out airstrikes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria over the previous two years.

The U.S. military has spent about \$450 million in construction at Al Udeid since 2003, expanding the facility from an expeditionary airfield in which many U.S. troops lived in tents to the more permanent structures there today. Qatar calculates it has spent \$8 billion there to support U.S. operations.

The U.S. presence at Tuesday's ceremony is expected to be relatively low-level, as defense officials try to distance themselves from the ongoing inter-gulf dispute.

Attiya said that Qatar hoped eventually to see Al Udeid declared a permanent American facility.

"Of course we would like to see our colleagues and allies permanently staying here with us," Attiya said. But the main purpose of the expansion, he said, "is that we have men and women away from home and we are trying always to modify and expand, just to make their stay comfortable."

Over the next five years, Qatar is also building two major new "top-of-the-line" naval bases, Attiyah said, both of which would be "able to host our partner the United States if they feel that it is convenient to send their navy as well."

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UAE Ordered By UN Court To Protect Rights Of Qataris (Biddle, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Jo Biddle

The UN's top court Monday ordered the United Arab Emirates to protect the rights of Qatari citizens, wading into a bitter year-long crisis triggered when Gulf countries snapped ties with Doha.

Judges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague narrowly ruled in a provisional but binding decision that the UAE must allow families which include Qatari members, to be reunited, and that Qatari students must be given the chance to complete their education in the Emirates.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and other allies severed ties with Qatar on June 7, 2017, accusing Doha of backing terrorism. Qatari nationals living in the UAE were officially given just 14 days to leave the country.

But Doha denies the accusations, and last month appealed to the ICJ to impose emergency measures against the UAE to protect its citizens. It has also accused Abu Dhabi of breaking the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

In a hearing in late June, Qatar alleged that the United Arab Emirates was spreading a “climate of fear” among Qatarsis living there, splitting families and causing “substantial pain” during the year-long blockade.

On Monday, the court’s judges found in Doha’s favour, ruling the measures imposed by the UAE risked causing “irreparable harm” to Qatari citizens.

– ‘Repairing the damage’ –

The judges voted by eight votes in favour of a series of provisional measures – with seven judges against – that the UAE “must ensure that families, that include a Qatari, separated by the measures adopted by the United Arab Emirates … are reunited,” said presiding judge Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf.

Qatari students must also be allowed “to complete their education” in the Emirates or obtain their educational records if they wish to study elsewhere. Qatarsis “affected” by the UAE measures must also be allowed “access to tribunals and other judicial organs” in the country.

Qatar welcomed Monday’s ruling, with foreign ministry spokesman Ahmed bin Saeed al-Rumaihi saying in a tweet that his country “was not seeking to escalate the dispute with the Emirates, but to repair the prejudice imposed on its citizens”.

The move into the international courts came a year after the severing of ties and the imposition of punitive measures by Gulf countries accusing Doha of backing terrorism.

Other measures included banning Qatar Airways from their airspace and closing the country’s only land border, with Saudi Arabia.

The UAE had insisted the ICJ had no authority to hear Qatar’s case and stressed the situation for Qatarsis living in the country today is different from a year ago.

In a statement, the UAE highlighted that the court’s decision involved only “provisional measures” and that “the court indicated certain measures with which the UAE is already in compliance”.

“Instead of these unproductive manoeuvres, Qatar should be engaging with the legitimate concerns of the UAE and the other three states that have ended relations with Qatar regarding its continuing support for terrorism and its efforts to destabilise the region,” it added in a statement quoted by the Emirates WAM news agency.

– ‘Destabilising the region’ –

In a separate twist, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates earlier this month also turned to the ICJ, asking that it quash a decision in Qatar’s favour, handed down by the UN’s global civil aviation body.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) ruled in late June that it had the jurisdiction to determine a dispute brought by Qatar, accusing its neighbours of violating an agreement that regulates the free passage of passenger planes through foreign airspace.

But Qatar’s three neighbours want the ICJ, set up in 1946 to rule in disputes against states, to nullify the ICAO’s ruling, saying its decision was “manifestly flawed and in violation of fundamental principles of due process and the right to be heard”.

Diplomatic efforts have so far proved powerless to resolve the crisis which has rendered the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council practically obsolete.

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Court Orders U.A.E. To Let Expelled Qatarsis Back In (Walsh, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Declan Walsh

The top United Nations court intervened Monday in the bitter political feud dividing the Persian Gulf, ordering the United Arab Emirates to allow the return of Qatari citizens expelled from the country last year.

The provisional order by the International Court of Justice, which is based in The Hague, is expected to have limited concrete effect. The court has no powers of enforcement and the United Arab Emirates, in response to the verdict, insisted it was already in compliance with it.

But the decision, by the most prominent international body to rule on the dispute, struck a symbolic blow to the punishing trade and diplomatic embargo that the United Arab Emirates and its allies — Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain — have been pressing against

Qatar for the past year in an effort to isolate the tiny and fabulously wealthy nation.

"This sends an early, strong signal that there will be no tolerance shown to countries that take arbitrary measures against Qataris," Lulwa al-Khater, a spokeswoman for Qatar's foreign ministry, said in comments published by Qatar's state media.

The ruling may have its biggest impact in the battle for influence in Western capitals and international bodies, where Qatar and its foes have spent tens of millions of dollars in the past year on conferences, lawyers, news media advertisements and Washington lobbyists.

The court order "marks another blow to the blockade, which has failed from the beginning to gain support from the international community," said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Qatar's foes initially enjoyed loud support from President Trump, who appeared to side with their accusations that Qatar was financing Islamist terrorist groups and was secretly in league with Iran. Qatar denied the charges, saying it was being targeted for its outspoken TV network, Al Jazeera.

American officials pointed out that Qatar was home to a major American military air base, and Mr. Trump later backed off. In April he welcomed Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to the White House, where Mr. Trump hailed him as a "great friend."

In the complaint filed to the International Court of Justice last month, Qatar argued that the United Arab Emirates breached an international convention on racism when it expelled thousands of Qatari citizens in the opening weeks of the embargo in June 2017.

Under the ruling issued Monday, the United Arab Emirates must allow families with a Qatari member that were separated to be reunited, and Qatari students who were expelled must be allowed to resume classes or obtain records to continue elsewhere. A third order stipulated that Qataris should be allowed to seek legal redress in the United Arab Emirates.

The orders do not constitute a final ruling, and it could be years before the full case is heard and decided.

The United Arab Emirates minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, attempted to put a positive spin on the decision, saying in a Twitter post that the judges had refused six other Qatari demands.

Mr. Gargash said his government had already met the "conditions required" by the court ruling.

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EUROPE & EURASIA

Jon Huntsman Slaps Back At Suggestion That He Resign As U.S. Ambassador To Russia (Harper, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Washington Times](#)

By Jennifer Harper

Robert Gehrke, a Salt Lake City Tribune columnist, recently suggested that U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman resign his post.

"Ambassador Huntsman, you work for a pawn, not a president. It's time to come home," Mr. Gehrke wrote in the wake of President Trump's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin last week.

Mr. Huntsman — former governor of Utah and a presidential hopeful — replied Sunday to this suggestion in a letter to the very same newspaper.

"As America's envoy to Russia, I am appointed by the president but confirmed by the Senate. I am charged with representing our country's interests, which in the case of Russia are complex and often little understood. Popular punditry is ill-suited to describing the acts of courage, dedication and patriotism I regularly witness as chief of Mission overseeing one of America's most sensitive overseas outposts," wrote Mr. Huntsman, a former U.S. ambassador to both Singapore and China who served in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush administrations — and who speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese.

"I have taken an unscientific survey among my colleagues, whom you reference, about whether I should resign. The laughter told me everything I needed to know," Mr. Huntsman observed.

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Former Ambassador Aims To Stop Russian Effort To Question Americans – Including Himself

(Hayes, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Christal Hayes

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia is visiting the nation's capital in hopes of stopping any effort by Russians to interrogate Americans, including himself.

Michael McFaul was one of about a dozen Americans that Russians want to question in exchange for the questioning of targets of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

The White House, at first, said it was considering the proposal that was raised during a meeting between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. It later put out a statement that shot down the idea.

McFaul said Monday on Twitter that he was heading to Washington and said while he believes there is a "low probability" that the Russian government would be able to get its hands on him, his hope is to make it "a zero probability event."

He said he plans to meet with "several US government officials to urge them to communicate with their Russian counterparts about the negative consequences of further harassing former US officials like me."

A White House official told USA TODAY that McFaul requested a meeting with the National Security Council and that "it was accepted out of courtesy."

The Washington Post reported McFaul will meet at the White House with Fiona Hill, a senior director on the National Security Council, who serves as Trump's top adviser on Russia.

Russia's interest in McFaul stems from his time as ambassador, a time when ties between the two countries deteriorated after the Obama administration attempted to "reset" the relationship.

He wrote a book on his tenure in Moscow and his contentious relationship with Putin, including when Obama signed into law the Magnitsky Act, named after Sergei Magnitsky, a tax accountant who died in prison after calling out fraud by Russian officials. The Magnitsky Act, which McFaul supported, imposed stiff sanctions on Moscow.

McFaul's book, "From Cold War to Hot Peace," details Kremlin attempts to discredit and harass him, with tactics that included dispatching protesters to his front gates and criticizing him on state media.

McFaul was named a "person of interest" by Russian prosecutors in their case against Bill Browder, an American citizen and associate of Magnitsky who had pushed for the passage of the law slapping sanctions on Russia.

Browder called the Russian investigation targeting him and others as a "crazy scheme."

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Donald Trump Says He 'Gave Up Nothing' In Putin Summit But Offers No Specifics On Talks (Jackson, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By David Jackson

A week after his meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin stirred bipartisan criticism at home, President Donald Trump on Monday defended his handling of the summit but he offered no details on what was said in the private, two-hour meeting between the two leaders in Helsinki.

"When you hear the Fake News talking negatively about my meeting with President Putin, and all that I gave up, remember, I gave up NOTHING," Trump said wrote on Twitter. "We merely talked about future benefits for both countries. Also, we got along very well, which is a good thing, except for the Corrupt Media!"

Trump has been criticized by both Republican and Democratic lawmakers for his joint news conference with Putin in Helsinki in which he declined to challenge the Russian president on issues such as Moscow's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

At the news conference following the private meeting, Trump also appeared to accept Putin's denials of trying to undermine the U.S. election, even though U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia did intervene.

Trump has defended his meeting with Putin by saying he wants to work with Russia on issues like counter-terrorism, North Korea,

Syria, and Ukraine, and he has invited Putin to visit Washington sometime in the fall, another source of anxiety for lawmakers. Rep. Trey Gowdy, R-S.C., chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform, said the evidence proves that Russia "is not our friend and they tried to attack us in 2016," and Trump needs to be more forthright about it. "The disconnect cannot continue," Gowdy said on Fox News Sunday. "The evidence is overwhelming and the president needs to say that and act like it."

U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller is probing whether Trump or anyone from his campaign coordinated with Russia in its attempt to tilt the 2016 election toward the Republican. Trump has denied any collusion and has repeatedly called the Mueller probe a "hoax" and a "witch hunt."

While defending the Putin meeting, Trump again called for ending the Mueller probe. Over the weekend, Trump zeroed in on release of a foreign intelligence search warrant regarding campaign aide Carter Page, claiming it is evidence that the Barack Obama administration "spied" on his campaign using information from a politically motivated "dossier" of information about Trump and the Russians.

That "Fake Dirty Dossier" is "responsible for starting the totally conflicted and discredited Mueller Witch Hunt!" Trump said in one tweet on Monday.

Legal analysts noted that intelligence agents had good reason to suspect Page had a relationship with Russia, and that the FBI found much of the dossier to be credible; they noted that four judges, all appointed by Republicans, signed off on the Page warrant and that Mueller recently obtained indictments on a dozen Russian intelligence officials on charges of election sabotage.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said on ABC's This Week that "there's no ignoring the fact that for whatever reason, this president acts like he's compromised."

There's no other way "to explain why he would side with this Kremlin former KGB officer rather than his own intelligence agencies," Schiff said.

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Trump: 'I Gave Up Nothing' To Russia (Muñoz, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Gabriella Muñoz

President Trump doubled down Monday on his defenses over Helsinki criticism, denying that he conceded anything to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The president accused the "corrupt" media of misrepresenting the relationship between the two leaders.

When you hear the Fake News talking negatively about my meeting with President Putin, and all that I gave up, remember, I gave up NOTHING, we merely talked about future benefits for both countries. Also, we got along very well, which is a good thing, except for the Corrupt Media! — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

Mr. Trump has repeatedly used this argument since backlash began to grow over his joint press conference with Mr. Putin last week. Critics from both political parties have denounced the president's comments.

Some prominent Democrats, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, suggested that the Russians may be manipulating the president by holding damaging information over his head.

Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee attempted, but were ultimately voted down by Republicans, to subpoena Mr. Trump's translator, who was the only other member of the U.S. delegation in the private meeting between the two leaders.

Reps. Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell argued the subpoena was necessary to determine what the president said to Mr. Putin, including any concessions or agreements he may have made.

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Russia Detains 6 Prison Guards Over Torture Video (Malpas, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Anna Malpas

Russian investigators said Monday they had detained six prison guards over a video showing officers brutally beating an inmate which was leaked to an independent newspaper.

The group of prison service employees, "acting deliberately, clearly exceeding their official powers, used violence against a prisoner," investigators said.

Human rights activists regularly report torture, humiliation and beatings in Russian prisons, but the leak of such an explicit video is rare.

The branch of the Investigative Committee for the Volga city of Yaroslavl, where the video was shot at a penal colony, said "today six people have already been detained."

"The criminals delivered multiple blows with hands, feet and unidentified objects to the man's torso and limbs," it said in a statement.

The 10-minute video posted by the Novaya Gazeta newspaper on Friday shows a group of 18 uniformed men methodically beating a man who is pinned down on a table as he groans and pleads for mercy. They also pour water on his head.

The prisoner, named as Yevgeny Makarov, was left covered with bruises and cuts on his legs which were swollen and infected, his lawyer wrote in a report quoted in the newspaper.

Makarov said he lost consciousness several times.

The video clearly shows the men's faces. Novaya Gazeta reported that it was shot in June 2017 but criminal action was only launched after the publication of the video.

Investigators said they had identified all those involved and were going through legal procedures to detain the rest of the participants.

They said that they would also look at the actions of the prison governor and top regional prison officials.

The video was shot with a portable video recorder that according to the law prison officers are obliged to carry.

The prisoner is still in jail but has been visited by a rights ombudsman and is relatively safe in a one-man cell, his lawyer Irina Biryukova told the Russian channel TV Rain.

– Threats from guards –

Rights group Public Verdict, which passed the video to Novaya Gazeta, said Monday that Biryukova has fled Russia after receiving threats and had asked for state protection for family members.

Biryukova told TV Rain that a reliable source in the region had informed her that prison guards had voiced personal threats against her.

"For my safety, we decided that it was necessary for me to leave Russia for the meantime," she said.

Amnesty International called on Russian authorities to "act immediately" to protect the lawyer.

"The launch of the investigation into the allegations of torture is a welcome first step towards justice," the rights group said in a statement.

"However, in the absence of a national mechanism which systematically works to prevent torture, the criminal case against Makarov's torturers will be an exception to the rule."

Biryukova said she was hopeful that the publicity around the case would lead to more arrests and eventual sentences, and that she would return to Russia soon.

The regional Investigative Committee told TASS state news agency it was checking into threats against Biryukova and could launch criminal action.

The case is not the first allegation of brutality against prisoners to emerge from the Yaroslavl colony.

Last year, Novaya Gazeta reported an inmate who was sentenced for taking part in protests against the return of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in 2012 was tortured there in a punishment cell.

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Ukraine Teens Pen Plays To Bridge War Divide (Gorshkov, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

CWASHAR0000811

AFP

By Dmytro Gorshkov

A boy flees his war-scarred hometown, leaving his mother behind. A gay youth struggles for acceptance from his parents. A gang harasses a young black footballer.

These and other dramas took centre stage in a show in Kiev this month, which brought together teenagers from the east and west of Ukraine to write plays.

"It is moving," said 15-year-old Filip Kazlauskas, who wrote one of the pieces, a rock opera entitled "Romeo from Avdiivka".

"I wanted to achieve the effect of making audiences sad and making them burst into tears."

The play is named after the teenager's eastern hometown, which lies on the frontline of the conflict dividing the country.

Performed by professional actors, it won a standing ovation from the audience.

But the event was really about the young playwrights – in a bid to bridge the cultural divide in the war-scarred country.

"This project positively affects the future... it establishes a dialogue between the east and west" of Ukraine, one of the organisers, Natalya Vorozhbyt, told AFP as spectators filed into the auditorium in Kiev city centre.

"When young playwrights from different parts of the country meet and find common themes, then dialogue emerges, and an understanding that they have much in common."

– Backdrop of war –

The "Class Act" theatre project was born three decades ago in Scotland and has migrated to various countries. It first came to Ukraine in 2016.

Twenty pupils aged 14 to 16 came to Kiev from Avdiivka, a government-controlled eastern town, and from the western town of Chop.

The 10 short plays they devised were produced by professional directors and staged back-to-back.

"We worked very easily," Valentyn Yelizaryev, a 15-year-old from Chop, told AFP.

"I really liked it, I've learned a lot from being here."

In post-Soviet Ukraine, cultural differences persist between the Ukrainian-speaking west and the mainly Russian-speaking east.

A Moscow-backed insurgency broke out in two industrial eastern provinces in 2014 and has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

That is the backdrop for "Romeo from Avdiivka".

The government-controlled town of 20,000 inhabitants lies right on the frontline. It suffers near-daily armed clashes between Kiev forces and pro-Russian rebels.

"A son fled the country but his mother opted to stay there as the war rages," says Kazlauskas, the young playwright.

Like his protagonist, he himself got away from the war zone – if only for a week of rehearsals and a one-off performance with the "Class Act" professionals.

"The very fact that these children are going to Kiev, that they are studying under the influence of playwrights... gives us hope that a new intellectual generation can grow up," said one of the actors involved, Oleksiy Vertynskyi.

"If it helps even half of them decide on their future, that would be great."

– Jailed filmmaker's blessing –

The project won praise from one of the most prominent artistic figures caught up in the conflict, Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov.

He wished the teenagers good luck in a letter published online by a friend.

Sentsov, who is being held in a remote Russian prison, has been on hunger strike for more than two months after being jailed for alleged terrorism in Russian-annexed Crimea.

But he insists he is a political prisoner.

At the end of the show in Kiev, everyone who had been involved in the performances went onstage and held up signs saying

CWASHAR0000812

#FreeSentsov.

Despite the regional and cultural divide, the participants are “so similar in our differences”, Pavlo Arie, one of the project’s directors, told AFP.

“Young people get the belief that they are worth something and that they can do something beautiful.”

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Fewer Migrants Are Making It To Europe. Here’s Why (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Migration patterns in the central Mediterranean have hit a chaotic point of flux, with fewer migrants successfully making it to Europe.

Until recently, the primary path taken by migrants to Europe looked something like this: Traffickers launched migrants from the Libyan coast. When the flimsy boats ran into trouble — and they inevitably did — the migrants were typically rescued by humanitarian groups or by European Union or Italian patrol boats. Then, with scant debate, they were taken to Italy. The route had plenty of dangers — the central Mediterranean has long been the deadliest area on the planet for migrants. And sometimes the journey was thwarted by Libya’s coast guard. But the vast majority who started from Libya made it to Europe. Between 2015 and 2017, according to United Nations data analyzed by The Washington Post, about 95 percent of migrants taking the so-called central Mediterranean route ended up on this continent’s shores.

Last month, however, the success rate was 45 percent — the lowest of any month in at least four years. A large proportion of migrants were intercepted and returned to North Africa. But deaths have spiked. According to the International Organization for Migration, 564 people died in June — or more than 7 percent of those who attempted the crossing. That is the highest percentage in any month since at least 2015. For the year, 3.4 percent have died attempting the journey, compared with 2.1 percent last year.

Some experts say migration to Europe is transforming at a pace unseen since early 2016, when the European Union struck a deal with Turkey with the hopes of closing off the flow of asylum seekers to Greece. So what’s behind the recent shifts?

It’s become harder to evade the Libyan coast guard

Many migrants don’t make it to Europe because they don’t make it past the fleet of Libyan patrol vessels. The coast guard, rebuilt with E.U. and Italian funding, has become the most important player in the Mediterranean. Though the unit has been patrolling its coastal waters for more than a year and a half, data suggests it is becoming far more proficient at its job: intercepting migrants, placing them in detention on Libyan shores and keeping them from Europe.

In 2017, the Libyan coast guard managed to catch about 1 in 9 migrants attempting the journey. This year, it is intercepting almost 2 in 5. In June, it intercepted 47 percent.

The European strategy of using Libyan patrols as a first of defense is controversial. Migrants returned to Libya have faced brutal extortion and even torture. Humanitarian groups have accused the Libyans of behaving recklessly during rescues.

But the E.U. has doubled down. After a June migration summit, the bloc’s leaders said that they would “step up” their support of the Libyan coast guard and that other vessels in the Mediterranean should “not obstruct” its operations. The leaders also proposed the creation of remote processing centers, probably in Africa, where migrants could be screened for asylum eligibility.

Libya’s cooperation is a key reason migration to this continent has fallen so precipitously from its peak in 2015, a year when more than a million refugees and asylum seekers reached Europe by sea. So far this year, the number of sea arrivals is at 52,000.

Italy has refused to be the default destination for rescued migrants

Despite Europe’s willingness to outsource patrols, Libya doesn’t meet international maritime standards for safe ports. And so other vessels — humanitarian, commercial or from the Italian coast guard — that pick up migrants in distress are obligated to take them elsewhere. Usually, that has been Italy. But since a populist government came to power two months ago, Italy has resisted.

Saying that his country would no longer support such a “huge weight” on its own, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini — leader of the far-right League party — announced in early June that he was closing ports to humanitarian rescue ships. He has temporarily held up European and Italian coast guard vessels, as well.

In several instances, Italy has forced ad hoc negotiations among European countries over where to send rescued migrants. Even when the negotiations end with a deal — in mid-July, a handful of countries divvied up 450 people rescued by a large fishing boat — human rights groups say the E.U. is endangering injured or weak migrants, keeping them adrift amid political standoffs.

"We have to get rid of the uncertainty and chaos around disembarkation," said Judith Sunderland, associate director for the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch.

Salvini recently suggested that Libya should be recategorized as a safe port — a change that would, in theory, allow European boats to return migrants to Libya. According to Italy's ANSA news service, Salvini said there is "underlying hypocrisy" in Europe when "you give money to the Libyans, you supply motor launches and you train the coast guard but then you deem Libya not a safe port."

Meanwhile, data suggests that a new pathway to Europe — in the western Mediterranean, not the central — is widening. It's unclear if the shift is a direct response by traffickers or migrants to the chaos. But last month, Spain for the first time became the busiest European arrival spot for migrants coming by sea. And Morocco is coming to rival Libya as the busiest launching point for traffickers' boats. For those who leave from Morocco, the odds of reaching Europe are higher. In the first 2½ weeks of July, some 3,600 migrants arrived in Spain, nearly triple the amount that arrived in Italy.

Fewer humanitarian rescue boats are patrolling

Experts caution that they aren't certain why there have been a greater number of deaths. Death figures can be volatile and can change from month to month based on particularly large accidents. But there weren't any mega-accidents in June.

One partial explanation could be that there are far fewer humanitarian rescue boats patrolling the area, after a spate of nongovernmental organizations stopped or paused their work, either for legal reasons or because of safety concerns after tense run-ins with Libyan patrollers. Only one NGO, Barcelona-based Proactiva Open Arms, has been operating in recent weeks. When Proactiva set off on its latest mission, Salvini said that the crew would only see Italy "in a postcard."

Analysts add that Libya might not yet have the manpower to fully patrol its own waters, adding to the dangers.

"It's not easy to say" why the death rate has increased, said Federico Fossi, with the U.N. refugee agency's Rome office. "Now there are very few NGOs. That has a big impact. There is a limited capacity in the Mediterranean."

He added, "It is a very rapidly changing environment. It's quite chaotic. The Libyan coast guard is not yet ready to be the only actor that is out there."

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Soccer Star's Resignation Deepens Germany's Immigration Debate (Pancevski, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Bojan Pancevski

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Mesut Ozil's Exit From German Soccer Team Stokes Debate On Integration (Schuetze, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Christopher F. Schuetze

Germany awoke to a national debate on integration, racism and sports on Monday, as the news hit that one of its most celebrated soccer players was quitting the national team, saying that he was the victim of bigotry and hypocrisy.

Mesut Ozil, a star of Germany's world champion 2014 team, announced his resignation in a series of lengthy social media posts, after enduring weeks of criticism for posing for a picture with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, and for his performance in Germany's shocking early exit from this year's World Cup.

"I'm a German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose," wrote Mr. Ozil, who was born in Germany to parents who had immigrated from Turkey.

Mr. Ozil, 29, has been a symbol of modern German soccer and, by extension, a modern, diverse Germany — an attacking midfielder who has been voted player of the year five times by German fans and has played on the national team for nearly a decade. His sudden departure from the national team raised long-simmering questions about ethnic identity in Germany, and the intersection of sports and politics.

"It is cause for alarm when a great German footballer like Mesut Ozil no longer feels wanted in his country because of racism and feels unrepresented by the DFB," the federal justice minister, Katarina Barley, wrote on Twitter shortly after the decision was

published on Sunday, referring to the German acronym of the German Football Association.

The sports journalist Martin Schneider wrote in the influential Süddeutsche Zeitung daily that, more than the squad's early exit from the tournament, "the end of Mesut Ozil in the German national team is the real defeat of the summer."

In May, Mr. Ozil and Ilkay Gundogan, another teammate with Turkish roots, posed with Mr. Erdogan, the autocratic ruler of Turkey who was campaigning for re-election.

That prompted some to question whether Mr. Ozil should be on the national team, and the picture was roundly criticized as partisan, in a country where major sports figures are expected to act like apolitical role models.

Then in June, Germany, the defending champion, endured the worst performance in its modern World Cup history — sent home from the tournament in Russia before 16 other teams advanced to the knockout round of play. The denunciation of Mr. Ozil by some fans, commentators and soccer officials escalated.

The team's general manager, Oliver Bierhoff, appeared to question Mr. Ozil's on-the-pitch performance, suggesting that he should have been left off the team. Reinhard Grindel, the head of the soccer association, publicly demanded that Mr. Ozil explain the Erdogan picture; Mr. Grindel, in turn, was accused of failing to protect Mr. Ozil from xenophobic attacks.

In his resignation statement on Sunday, Mr. Ozil wrote that his meeting with Mr. Erdogan was not political, but "was about me respecting the highest office" of Turkey.

A large part of his statement focused on his disagreement with Mr. Grindel, a former member of Parliament from Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right party.

Mr. Ozil referred to comments Mr. Grindel had made that dismissed multiculturalism in Germany as a lie.

Ulrike Demmer, a spokeswoman for Ms. Merkel, praised Mr. Ozil and said that soccer played a big role in integrating immigrants into Germany. She said the chancellor respected Mr. Ozil's decision to quit, and that others should likewise respect it.

But the deep divide between Mr. Ozil and much of Germany's football establishment was illustrated on Monday by Uli Hoeneß, the president of the FC Bayern Munich team, who accused the player of "hiding his poor performance behind this picture" with Mr. Erdogan.

France's multicultural national team did not prompt the same kind of debates about race and identity this year. It helped, of course, that the squad won the tournament, bringing home the World Cup 20 years after the country's first victory in 1998.

But comments from abroad did elicit reactions — most notably an exchange between the comedian Trevor Noah, the host of "The Daily Show," and Gérard Araud, the French ambassador in Washington.

Mr. Noah, a South Africa native who had proudly said after the victory that "Africa won the World Cup," was quickly rebuked by Mr. Araud, who wrote on Twitter and even in a formal letter that the "Daily Show" host had misunderstood France's cultural model.

Turkish officials were quick to celebrate Mr. Ozil's decision to leave the German team. Justice Minister Abdulhamit Güle wrote on Twitter that Mr. Ozil had "kicked his best goal against the virus of fascism, by leaving German national team."

A former president of the German soccer association, Theo Zwanziger, called the resignation "a major setback for integration efforts beyond football in our country," and said that the episode risked sending a message that people of immigrant backgrounds were "second-class Germans."

Mr. Ozil's statement about the infamous picture reached a big audience — he has 23 million Twitter followers, more than any of his former teammates, and heavy news coverage drew many other people to his broadside.

Mr. Ozil, who is under contract with Arsenal F.C. in Britain until 2021, wrote his message in English, ensuring a wide readership outside Germany.

Intentional or not, Mr. Ozil's words on social media echoed those of another German who was forced to deal with a dual identity.

In 1922, Albert Einstein said in a speech in Paris: "If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I am a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew."

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Anti-Nuke Protesters Break Into Joint German-US Air Base (AP)
Monday, July 23, 2018

CWASHAR0000815

Associated Press

The German military said seven protesters were detained Monday after cutting through a fence surrounding an air base believed to hold U.S. nuclear weapons.

Germany's dpa news agency reported that the intruders were stopped by guards after entering the security zone at Buechel Air Base, in the country's west. The base is operated by the German Luftwaffe but the U.S. Air Force's 702nd Munitions Support Squadron is also stationed there.

According to dpa, those arrested were anti-nuclear activists belonging to a variety of Christian denominations. They were released shortly after being detained and now face criminal complaints for property damage, breaking and entering, and dangerous interference with air traffic.

It's the second time in less than 10 days that anti-nuclear activists have broken into the base.

A legal complaint from a local resident over the storage of nuclear weapons at the base was rejected by Germany's top court earlier this year.

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German Industry Group Says EU Mustn't Be Blackmailed By US (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The head of an influential German industry organization is calling on the U.S. and the European Union to put an end to the escalating trade dispute between the two economic superpowers.

Dieter Kempf of the Federation of German Industries said Monday that "Europe mustn't allow itself to be blackmailed and should act with confidence" when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker visits Washington on Wednesday.

Kempf called on U.S. President Donald Trump to "scale down the rhetoric" and abolish tariffs that he said were imposed "under the cover of national security."

He noted that German automakers alone employ 180,000 people in the U.S. and 60 percent of the cars they produce are made for export.

Kempf called for talks on resolving trade disputes to take place at the World Trade Organization.

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May Tells U.K.'s Leave-Voting Heartlands They Need A Soft Brexit (Ross, Shankleman, Morales, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Tim Ross, Jess Shankleman And Alex Morales

Theresa May traveled to Britain's pro-Brexit industrial heartland to sell her plan to keep close ties to the European Union, as she battles to win support for her blueprint for future trade with the bloc.

The prime minister said supply chains for carmakers based in the region – including the major Nissan plant in Sunderland – depend on "frictionless" trade with the EU's single market, and that means sticking closely to its rules.

"This is a complex issue and the question people were asked was a simple one – leave or remain," May told an audience at Reece Group, an engineering firm in Newcastle, on Monday. "But behind that, in terms of the negotiations, are whole layers of complexity in terms of the future relationship."

May has faced a backlash from hardline Brexit campaigners inside and outside her government since publishing a 98-page prospectus for the U.K.'s future trade terms with the EU on July 12. She detailed plans for a new free-trade area, in which British companies would comply with European market regulations for manufactured goods and agricultural and food products.

But Brexit campaigners say she's betraying their vision of a clean break with the bloc. Two pro-Brexit ministers – Boris Johnson and David Davis – quit May's Cabinet in protest at her plans to keep close to the EU and adopt a so-called "common rule book" for trade

in goods.

Short on Time

Time is running short for May to get a deal with the bloc on the terms of the divorce at October's summit of EU leaders. The U.K. is scheduled to leave the EU on March 29 – with or without an agreement.

Even if she persuades her Cabinet and Parliament to back the plan, May still needs to get a deal agreed with the EU. She insisted European officials had made "constructive responses" so far. "I won't say that you won't hear some negative things being said," the premier added.

It was a rare unscripted appearance from May, whose mechanical performances on the campaign trail last year earned her the nickname "the Maybot." Her decision to gamble on an early general election ultimately backfired.

On Monday, the prime minister was asked how she managed to relax doing such a stressful job. "I enjoy cooking, which has a benefit because you get to eat it as well as make it," she said.

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U.K. Labour's Antisemitism Rift Heads For September Showdown (Penny, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Thomas Penny

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the U.K.'s opposition Labour Party, will face a ballot called by his own lawmakers in September over the way the party tackles antisemitism in its ranks.

Labour members of Parliament triggered a vote at a meeting on Monday night over the definition of racism against Jews that Labour uses for disciplining party members. They want to adopt in full the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition used by organizations and governments worldwide.

Corbyn has been under pressure since becoming party leader in 2015 over his response to antisemitism in the party and the failure to promptly discipline members for racism against Jews. He faced an unprecedented demonstration by Jewish groups outside Parliament earlier this year after he was found to have defended an antisemitic mural and was accused of turning a blind eye to racist language used by party members in their criticism of Israel.

Former minister Margaret Hodge, a secular Jew, is facing disciplinary action from the party for "abusive conduct" after confronting Corbyn over the issue last week. She attended Monday evening's meeting at which it was agreed to hold a ballot of lawmakers when Parliament returns from its summer break in September.

Definition, Omissions

"The kick in the teeth to the Jewish community from not adopting the code is overwhelming," Hodge said after the meeting. "It's very gloomy. I don't understand why he can't just adopt it. If they don't think there's enough room to be critical, they can clarify and add to the code."

The latest row was sparked when Labour's ruling National Executive Council agreed a code of conduct that omits four examples of antisemitism used by the IHRA in its full definition, though the party says they are covered by other parts of its rules.

The four omitted examples refer to accusing Jewish people of being loyal to Israel ahead of their own country, claiming Israel is a racist state, setting higher standards of behavior for Israel than other states and comparing the Israeli government to the Nazis.

"Anti-semitism is a poison that must be challenged wherever it raises its head, across Europe and at home," Corbyn wrote in an article for the Evening Standard newspaper earlier this year. "Hatred and bigotry towards Jewish people has no place in our society, whether on the streets or online. And that of course goes for the Labour Party too."

After the ballot of lawmakers, the issue will go to the NEC where there will be a recorded vote at which campaigners hope the members who refuse to accept the whole IHRA definition will be exposed.

"This is what we wanted," lawmaker Louise Ellman said after the ballot was agreed. "I'm very moved by the strength of support, people spoke from the heart."

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Britain Experiences Worst Year For Living Standards Since 2012 (Atkinson, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Andrew Atkinson

U.K. living standards rose at their slowest pace since 2012 in the past year, with the post-crisis recovery in incomes going into reverse for the poorest 30 percent of families, according to the Resolution Foundation.

Typical disposable incomes after housing costs rose just 0.9 percent, held back by the pound-induced surge in inflation following the 2016 Brexit referendum, the London-based think tank estimated in a report Tuesday. Poorer households were also victims of welfare cuts and saw their incomes decline by 0.3 percent.

The foundation estimated the loss to poorer families at as much as 150 pounds (\$200) a year as higher wages and lower taxes were not enough to offset cuts to tax credits and child benefit. Child poverty almost certainly rose last year, and the increase since 2010 has been underestimated in government data, it said.

"It is vital that government and other policy makers understand the positive impact that cash transfers have on low-income families, not least as they are in the middle of a huge multi-year program of over 14 billion pounds worth of benefit cuts," said Adam Corlett, senior economic analysts at the foundation. "The risk is that, unless the lessons of the past are learned, the future could spell squeezed incomes and further increases in child poverty."

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The Queen, The KGB Spy And The Prime Minister Who Wasn't Told (Hutton, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Robert Hutton

Former U.K. Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home wasn't told that one of the Queen's aides had confessed to being a Soviet agent because his Home Secretary did not want to "add to his burden," according newly released files.

The revelation is contained in previously secret documents released on Tuesday at the National Archives in London. Other files deal with Margaret Thatcher's habit of falling asleep in cars and the way her office prepared for the election of her successor.

In 1964, after years under suspicion, Anthony Blunt, a former officer for the Security Service MI5, confessed that he passed documents to the KGB during the war. By this time he was a leading art historian, looking after Queen Elizabeth II's collection in his role as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures.

But the U.K. government was already reeling from the unmasking of the "Cambridge Spy Ring," a group who had been recruited by the Soviets while at university and had gone on to penetrate the highest levels of British intelligence. It didn't want to admit that it had found another member, so Blunt was offered immunity from prosecution – and protection from public exposure – in return for a full confession.

Palace Secret

The Palace was told about Blunt's treachery, but was asked to keep him in place so as not to arouse suspicion. Home Secretary Henry Brooke decided not to tell Douglas-Home. He may have wanted to avoid putting the prime minister in a position where he felt obliged to tell lawmakers from the opposition Labour Party about the scandal.

It wasn't until 1979 that Blunt was publicly named as a Soviet agent, when details of his role were published in a book. Thatcher confirmed it to Parliament, but her revelation that Douglas-Home had been unaware of the confession was greeted with astonishment.

'Well-Meant Effort'

After Thatcher's statement Brooke sent her a letter. "I have written to Alec to explain why in April 1964 I did not bring him in on what was happening about Blunt," he said. "And to say how sorry I am if in my well-meant effort not to add to his burden I may, with hindsight, have exercised my discretion wrongly."

Some of the files have a contemporary echo. Theresa May, trying to fend off anti-European attacks from Conservative lawmaker Jacob Rees-Mogg, won't be surprised to learn that Rees-Mogg's father, William, caused problems for one of her predecessors, John Major.

In 1993, Rees-Mogg senior went to court to try to stop Britain from ratifying the treaty that created the European Union. When he lost his case, Major was delighted. "Good," he wrote. "A full gloat is merited."

The files also show how both Conservative and Labour governments, concerned by the threat of communism, supported

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propaganda operations and urged MI5 to focus on suspected subversives in trades unions and the media.

In 1969, Labour Home Secretary James Callaghan, despite or perhaps because of his party's close links to organized labor, asked officials to look at ways that left-wing union leaders could be ousted, possibly by leaking stories to the press. A decade and a half later, Thatcher asked security officials to investigate whether left-wingers were trying to infiltrate the civil service.

Meanwhile, for three decades after the end of World War II, the British Foreign Office ran a secret propaganda section, the "Information Research Department," which aimed to provide information about the evils of communism abroad and at home and briefed selected journalists. The diplomats decided their best chance of being convincing was if their reports were trustworthy. The U.S. television journalist Edward Murrow was among those who admired the IRD's briefings.

Thatcher Naps

While Thatcher is famous for having got by on four hours of sleep a night, less well-known is her habit of catching up by napping on car journeys. It happened so often that her office asked for a specially designed headrest for her Daimler, to protect her neck if the car braked suddenly while she was dozing.

When Thatcher was finally ousted in 1990, her office began preparing for her successor. There were three candidates: Chancellor of the Exchequer John Major, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, and the man who brought Thatcher down, Michael Heseltine. A folder was prepared for each of them. Now public for the first time, they contain details of how the new prime minister should behave upon being invited to meet the Queen at Buckingham Palace, what government posts they would need to fill, and what urgent policy decisions they faced.

The first folder prepared was for Heseltine, a former Defence Secretary who had long been considered a likely successor to Thatcher. The Hurd and Major folders were then based on that, with variations reflecting their different situations. But Conservative lawmakers had different ideas from the officials: They went for Major as the compromise candidate.

And the Heseltine folder? It was filed away, a two-word scrawl at the top of the first page marking the end of his attempt to reach the summit of British politics: "Not needed."

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Satellite Pictures Show A Record Heat Wave Turning Britain From Green To Brown (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

You can't help but have noticed the lack of rain in many areas over the last 10-12 weeks. It's even changed the way the UK looks from space! pic.twitter.com/T4Cjm8GMH3— Met Office (@metoffice) July 18, 2018

For much of the year, Britain is wet and dreary, more mystery novel than sparkling beach read. Come summer, though, Britons can feel a bit smug. While Americans sweat and swelter, Brits enjoy warm days and sweater-weather nights.

At least that's usually the case. But not this year.

Britain is in the throes of the longest heat wave since 1976. Average summer temperatures usually hover around 78 degrees. In London, it stays slightly cooler, hitting the low 70s during the day and dropping into the 50s at night. This year, it's been nearly 10 degrees hotter, with spikes well into the 90s. It's been unusually dry, too — just two inches of rain have fallen between June 1 and July 16, making it the driest summer on record.

And experts say the heat will last at least through early August. The Heat Health Watch Service, run by the Met Office and Public Health England, has issued a warning, urging people to stay inside and drink plenty of fluids. Prime Minister Theresa May has urged people to stay out of the sun through Friday, when temperatures are expected to hit 93 degrees.

The weather has been so hot and dry that it has turned Britain from green to brown. Satellite images released by the Met Office, Britain's national weather service, show just how dramatically the weather has changed the country's topography.

Updated Satellite images of Ireland showing the forty shades of green turning to shades of brown as #Drought continues with no rain in many areas since the 20th of June. Images from 24th June, 3rd and 10th of July during #Heatwave pic.twitter.com/EVqg9UbfSf— Carlow Weather (@CarlowWeather) July 10, 2018

In addition to browned fields and crop damage, the warm, dry weather has been blamed for wildfires in northwestern England and a ban on sprinklers in Ireland.

There have been some unexpected upsides. The dry conditions exposed a "drowned village" in a reservoir in Dartmoor, Devon. The valley was flooded in 1898, experts say, submerging village walls, a farmhouse and a bridge. In Wales, researchers uncovered an

early medieval cemetery and a prehistoric Roman farm. The Independent newspaper described it as a “gold rush” and “near-unprecedented bonanza” for archaeologists.

A report from Britain’s Met Office suggests that climate change will make heat waves more frequent and severe.

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3-Year-Old Boy Deliberately Attacked With Acid In British Supermarket, Police Say (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

British authorities have struggled in recent years with a troubling rise in acid attacks that have left many victims blinded and disfigured.

Some have been part of gang violence. Some have been linked to broken relationships. And some defy easy explanation for their apparent randomness.

Officials now are trying to understand why a 3-year-old boy was splashed with a caustic substance Saturday in a discount store in the British town of Worcester. The toddler suffered severe burns on his arm and face. He has since been able to leave the hospital, but authorities now say they believe it was a deliberate attack. Four men have been taken into custody.

“The incident will rightly shock the local community, and I would like to reassure local people that we are carrying out a thorough investigation,” said West Mercia Police Chief Superintendent Mark Travis.

Following previous attacks, investigators have at times been at a loss to find a pattern.

Many attacks have occurred in or around London and have targeted gang members. But a range of others — from bankers to moped riders — have become victims in apparent random attacks.

Stopping acid attacks also is difficult, mostly because acids can be easily purchased in convenience stores as drain cleaners or bleach.

Such attacks are particularly prevalent in parts of South Asia, where they mostly involve women being targeted by men. Data by London Metropolitan Police last year found that attackers and victims in Britain are predominantly male. The overall majority of victims are younger than 30. Among the attackers, every fifth identified suspect was a minor.

In London, the number of attacks was at an all-time high last year, with 50 percent more cases reported than in 2016. (Three of the four suspects in custody over Saturday’s attack were arrested in the British capital, even though the crime occurred more than 100 miles away.)

In some districts, courts have started asking visitors to take sips out of their bottles if they wish to enter with liquids to prevent attacks.

On a national level, authorities are also considering the introduction of new guidelines and laws to restrict sales of liquids that could be used in attacks or to introduce harsher minimum punishments.

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French Parliament Demands Answers As Macron Aide Is Indicted On Charges Of ‘Gang Violence’ (Willsher, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Kim Willsher

Members of the French Parliament demanded answers Monday after a senior security aide to President Emmanuel Macron was indicted on charges of engaging in “gang violence” and impersonating a police officer.

In what has become the biggest scandal to rock Macron’s 14-month-old administration, Alexandre Benalla was recorded on camera violently attacking a young man and a woman at a Workers’ Day demonstration as protesters clashed with riot police on May 1. He has since been fired.

Macron, who knew of the alleged criminal assaults less than 24 hours after they happened, is now under growing pressure to explain why his office failed to report them to the public prosecutor’s office.

The president’s office had claimed Benalla — who was wearing a police-issue helmet, visor and a police armband and was carrying

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a police-frequency radio — was authorized to join the operation as an “observer.” Police officials have denied this.

Benalla, 26, appeared before a judge on Sunday afternoon along with Vincent Crase, a member of Macron’s governing La Republique en Marche (the Republic on the Move) party, also charged with violence against protesters. Three senior police officers were indicted at the same time on charges of having illegally handed over video of the attacks to Benalla.

Macron has made no public statement about the increasingly damaging scandal. After a crisis dinner at the Elysee Palace on Sunday, an unidentified advisor told French journalists that the president considered Benalla’s behavior “shocking and unacceptable.”

On Monday, two senior officials, Interior Minister Gerard Collomb and Paris Police Chief Michel Delpuech, gave evidence at a hastily called inquiry at the National Assembly.

Lawmakers want to know, among other things, why Benalla was suspended for two weeks, then allowed to return to his post, retaining job perks that included a luxury flat in central Paris. He was fired only after questioning by police in the aftermath of the publication Wednesday, by Le Monde news site, of video of the assaults. That was the first the public knew of the scandal.

During more than two hours of quizzing by members of Parliament, Collomb said that he understood Benalla’s presence at the demonstrations as an “observer” was legitimate but that his violent behavior was “unacceptable.” He told the hearing he had no idea how Benalla obtained a police armband and radio.

Both Collomb and Delpuech admitted knowing about Benalla’s attack for more than two months, but passed the buck back to the president’s office, saying as Benalla’s employer, the Elysee was responsible for reporting his actions to the prosecutor’s office.

Asked why his officers had handed over video recordings of the assaults to Benalla, Delpuech suggested there were “unhealthy friendships” between the officers and Benalla.

Delpuech contradicted the Elysee spokesman and Collomb, insisting he had not given any authorization for Benalla to attend the protests and was “astonished” to discover he was present. Alain Gibelin, director of public order at the Paris police prefecture, also testified that Benalla had no official authorization to be with police at the protest.

“The rules are simple: Only the police prefect can give an authorization. I repeat in a precise and formal manner: Mr. Benalla had no authorization whatsoever from the prefect of police to be present at this demonstration,” Gibelin said. He said he later discovered a subordinate officer had given Benalla a police helmet and visor; he said he had no idea how Benalla had obtained the armband and radio.

He said those questions were the subject of a police disciplinary investigation. Three further investigations are underway: a criminal investigation overseen by a judge and separate parliamentary investigations in the National Assembly and Senate.

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Bodyguard Scandal Highlights Macron’s Aloofness, Critics Of French President Say (Nossiter, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Adam Nossiter

President Emmanuel Macron was furious. “I didn’t come here to see you!” he shot back late last week at the small band of journalists peppering him with questions in this southwestern French village.

Mr. Macron had come to France’s rural heartland, where the economy is less than shining, hoping to connect with ordinary people, lift his sagging poll numbers and shed his image as the aloof, coldhearted president of the rich.

Instead, it was a scandal surrounding his security chief, Alexandre Benalla, who was caught on video beating up a May Day protester — and Mr. Macron’s refusal to answer questions about it from reporters — that once again underscored what his critics deride as his monarchical management style.

In the days since, the “Benalla affair,” as it has become known, has developed into the biggest crisis of his young presidency, barely more than a year old.

Mr. Macron’s political opponents are having a field day with the affair, saying it typifies an opaque, unresponsive and insular presidency populated by a tight band of ultraloyalists.

Mr. Macron, a 40-year-old former investment banker and a relatively untested politician, seems to keep providing them with ammunition.

"You are the only ones who are interested in this," Mr. Macron snapped at the journalists following him, before turning his back and returning to greet the small crowds.

But even in the crowd, not everyone was benevolent, and Mr. Macron's assessment of the Benalla affair was off key. It is consuming Parliament, threatening the future of at least one close associate and, for now at least, derailing Mr. Macron's reformist agenda.

On Monday, an unusual parliamentary investigative commission hastily convened to interrogate Mr. Macron's interior minister, Gérard Collomb, a close ally, about his handling of the matter. Some lawmakers called for his resignation, even as Mr. Collomb sought to deflect blame from himself, saying that he had informed the president's office and the police about Mr. Benalla's behavior but that it was up to them to respond. He was followed by the Paris police chief, who called Mr. Benalla's behavior "reprehensible."

On the trip, Mr. Macron kept up with his bland "How are you doing?" as he greeted well-wishers, kissed babies and was fussed over by grandmothers, even as the reporters kept up their questioning.

"What's the difference between Benalla and the 'Black Blocs?'" a journalist shouted, referring to the anarchist protesters who stir up trouble at French street demonstrations. Mr. Macron ignored the question.

The video of Mr. Benalla's thrashing of the protester last May Day has shocked France — almost as much as subsequent videos showing him close by Mr. Macron's side on numerous outings. The president's "Mr. Security" accompanied him on biking trips, went skiing with him and was with him at tennis matches.

In the video, Mr. Benalla can be seen, in unauthorized police gear, violently dragging a protester on the ground even as the prostrate man pleads with him. Mr. Benalla grabs him by the neck then hits him several times for no apparent reason. Another video revealed by the newspaper Le Monde, which broke the story, shows him wrestling a young female protester.

A favored member of Mr. Macron's inner circle, the bearded and burly Mr. Benalla had a presidential apartment on the fashionable Quai Branly in Paris, a chauffeured car and a special legislative floor pass granted to few. It was all part of "an unwholesome old-boy network," the Paris police chief, Michel Delpuech, told Parliament on Monday.

Mr. Benalla and a colleague were charged with assault on Sunday. He has been fired from his job at the Élysée, the presidential palace, where he had an office. But especially given that Mr. Macron and his associates were aware of Mr. Benalla's violent behavior immediately, the questions have not gone away:

Why was Mr. Benalla allowed to keep his position and given a mere 15-day suspension? Why was he riding in the bus with the victorious French national soccer team as recently as a week ago? Why weren't judicial authorities immediately informed of his violent acts? Why did the Macron government shield Mr. Benalla, until Le Monde's scoop last week made it impossible for officials to do so?

To the critics of the president, the Benalla affair — and his silence about it — says much about Mr. Macron's distant style, which had never been put to the test of an election until he unexpectedly gained the presidency last year.

"He's surrounded by people who sing his praises day and night, and he's never been confronted with the essence of what it is to manage power," said Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the opposition to Mr. Macron in Parliament and head of the left-wing La France Insoumise party, or France Unbowed, in a telephone interview on Monday.

"Why was he incapable of understanding this situation?" Mr. Mélenchon asked. "His only method is the crossing of the Bridge at Arcole," he said, referring to a famous bold Napoleonic victory. "So he doesn't understand the reality of it."

"Essentially his style is monarchic, that of an absolute president," Mr. Mélenchon added. "He's a man who said he gained power by force and surprise, and he's surrounded by people who have no experience of the state, who think of the state as a sort of corporation, a business."

Mr. Macron's distance from his constituents — highlighted by a string of recent missteps, including the public upbraiding of a bewildered teenager and the ordering up of a costly dinner service for the Élysée — was on display during his trip last week. He engaged with the crowds easily enough, smiling and shaking hands.

But he couldn't resist lecturing a middle-aged woman in the crowded receiving line in the provincial capital, Périgueux. She was distraught over her shaky financial situation. For 10 minutes the woman engaged stubbornly with the president, pleading for help, as hundreds watched.

"Listen to me well, Mr. Macron," she said. "I work but I no longer have the means to live. My life was better before. I work and I have a diploma. I work every day. I have children, and I can't even pay for their vacations. We're just not making it."

"You say you are lightening up taxes on the one hand, but on the other you are loading us up," she added. "And we are just not

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making it."

Mr. Macron responded fluently but with abstractions and little empathy, describing a series of government programs and plans he insisted confidently were going to make life better.

"No, no," the president said. "First of all what you are saying isn't strictly speaking true. And then, when you pay your phone bill and your gas bill, it's not the state that's setting the rates. You can blame the state for everything, this or that is going up, but, it's not all the state's fault."

"Yes, but I can't change the tires on my car," the woman responded. "I can't afford the inspection. I can't even maintain my car. We're really in the hole. This is not the life I dreamed of."

Later, Mr. Macron made a speech in this rural village, promising more attention from the state, a "reinvention" of state services. The crowd listened politely but the applause was light.

"That was absolutely nothing, nothing, it's the usual promises," said Thierry Krevisan, a salesman who had stood for hours in the hot sun waiting for the president to show up. "It's always the same speech."

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Macron's Security Aide 'Dumbfounded' By Storm Around Him (Ganley, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Elaine Ganley

The security aide close to French President Emmanuel Macron who is alleged to have beaten up a protester during a May Day protest is "dumbfounded" by the storm around him, his lawyers said Monday.

Footage of the violence has caused consternation across France, and the affair has become the biggest internal crisis to hit Macron since he became president in May 2017.

A parliamentary inquiry opened hearings Monday, a day after an investigating judge filed preliminary charges against the aide, Alexandre Benalla.

In a statement, Benalla's lawyers said he "took the initiative" to intervene at the protest because police on the scene were "apparently overwhelmed."

Attorneys Audrey Gadot and Laurent-Franck Lienard described Benalla's actions as "vigorous" but "without violence" — despite video showing him beating a protester and yanking another protester away.

The lawyers suggested in the statement, published on TF1-TV's Internet site, that Macron was the target of politicians and media focused on the case since Benalla was identified five days ago by the newspaper Le Monde as the man acting violently.

"This personal initiative (of Benalla) ... today clearly serves to tarnish the presidency in conditions that defy understanding," the statement said.

The presidential office's failure to act immediately has raised a series of questions about the actions of those close to Macron, who has yet to comment.

The lawyers' comments came as the first of a series of hearings into the May Day events began. The parliamentary commission was hastily set up to try to find out why it took 2 1/2 months to open a judicial probe into the actions of Benalla.

On Sunday, Benalla and four others, including three ranking police officers, were informed of charges against them regarding their alleged roles during the protest that turned particularly violent, with shops and cars damaged.

Though the Elysee Palace knew about what Benalla had done while embedded with police as an observer, the aide was able to keep his job. The Elysee changed tack last week and said it was firing Benalla. But that development only came about after Le Monde identified the aide in a video of the incident published.

At the hearing, France's interior minister, Gerard Collomb, and the Paris police chief insisted it wasn't their job to inform judicial officials that Benalla beat up a protester. However, they contradicted each other about who told whom about what happened May 1.

Collomb, who was told about the incident the day after the protests and is in charge of France's security forces, said Benalla was not under his supervision.

"I will remind you ... that on May 2, I made sure that the president's office as well as the police prefecture had been informed about

Mr. Benalla's doings," Collomb said.

"And so I thought, as the rule is in cases of misconduct, that adequate measures had been taken It was up to them to sanction it. And eventually to inform judicial authorities."

Laying out the sequence of events, Collomb said his top aide informed him on May 2 of a video showing Benalla beating up a protester and that both the president's office and police chief were informed.

The minister said he was advised of the sanctions later that day. Benalla's subsequent two-week suspension and his re-assignment to a desk job have been roundly viewed as inadequate.

Like Collomb, Paris Police Chief Michel Delpuech told the committee that he failed to involve judicial officials because he thought the matter had been settled by the relevant authority.

"I considered it falls to the initiative of officials in the hierarchy," he said.

The police chief denounced what he called "unhealthy cronyism" to explain Benalla's apparent sway within France's security apparatus.

Benalla, he said, was a "known quantity," although he conceded he did not personally know him.

However, both the interior minister and the police chief said Benalla was among some 40 people present in the command room on the night of May 1, watching video screens of the police cleanup operation of the protests.

Numerous lawmakers have implored Macron to come forward with explanations about why sufficient action was not taken in May against Benalla.

"This silence cannot last," conservative lawmaker Valerie Boyer said Monday after hours of hearings, which were set to continue into the night.

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F-35 Transfers To Turkey Held Back Under U.S. Defense Measure (Capaccio, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Tony Capaccio

Transfers to Turkey of Lockheed Martin Corp.'s F-35 would be barred temporarily under a compromise defense policy measure agreed to on Monday, according to House and Senate aides.

Turkish receipt of the fighter jets would be held back until the Pentagon submitted an assessment within 90 days of the measure's enactment on U.S.-Turkish relations, the impact of Turkey's planned acquisition of Russia's advanced S-400 missile defense system and the ramifications for the U.S. industrial base if Turkey is dropped from the international F-35 program.

The move, reflecting the tensions in U.S.-Turkish relations, is part of a \$717 billion defense policy bill (H.R. 5515) for fiscal 2019 crafted by congressional negotiators that awaits final approval in the House and Senate. The measure also would hold back some funds for Defense Department cloud activities, reflecting the controversy over a winner-take-all cloud contract that competitors say would favor Amazon.com Inc.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had warned Congress against cutting off transfers of the F-35. In a letter to lawmakers this month, Mattis said he agreed "with congressional concerns about the authoritarian drift in Turkey and its impact on human rights and rule of law." But he said an F-35 cutoff would risk triggering an international "supply chain disruption" that would drive up costs and delay deliveries of the fighter.

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey plans to buy about 100 F-35s, joining the U.K. and Australia as the top international customers. At least 10 Turkish companies are building parts and components, such as the cockpit displays, for other partners, according to Bethesda, Maryland-based Lockheed.

The compromise measure crafted by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees also would let the president waive a requirement to impose sanctions on countries and entities doing business with Russia for as long as 180 days if the party involved is taking steps to distance itself from a commercial relationship with the Russian defense and intelligence sectors, according to committee aides and a Democratic summary of the bill.

There, too, Mattis had urged lawmakers to hold off, writing them last week that "there is a compelling need to avoid significant

unintended damage to our long-term, national strategic interests" even though "Russia should suffer consequences for its aggressive and destabilizing behavior as well as its continuing illegal occupation of Ukraine."

On other issues the House-Senate compromise:

- Would hold back 15 percent of requested fiscal 2019 funding for Defense Department cloud activities until a report on strategy and the migration of data is submitted within 90 days after the bill's enactment. The House version had called for withholding 50 percent. But the provision isn't intended to delay award of the disputed multibillion-dollar JEDI Cloud contract.
- Would authorize buying two Ford-class aircraft carriers built by Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc. under a single contract but require the Navy to submit certain certifications before putting the second carrier on contract in fiscal 2019.
- Wouldn't eliminate the Washington Headquarters Services, a support agency for the Pentagon, as proposed in the House-passed version.
- Would authorize three Littoral Combat Ships, two more than requested by Navy. The ships are made in two versions by Lockheed and Austal Ltd.
- Would authorize 77 F-35s, as requested by the Trump administration.
- Would allow low-yield nuclear weapons to be carried on submarines but require yearly authorization.

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49 People Confirmed Dead In Greece Wildfires (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Greece's fire department said 49 people are confirmed to have died in forest fires that swept through popular seaside holiday areas near the Greek capital.

Fire department spokeswoman Stavroula Malliri added that 156 adults and 16 children have been hospitalized with injuries. Eleven of the adults are in serious condition.

Malliri said Tuesday that strong winds have fanned the flames, with the fires spreading rapidly into inhabited areas, preventing people who are in their homes or in their cars from fleeing.

Greece has requested firefighting help from the European Union, and Malliri said a military transport plane is arriving with 60 firefighters from Cyprus.

Spain's government said it sent two amphibious planes to help fight the twin forest fires.

Spain's Ministry of Agriculture says that each of the two Canadair-type planes dispatched early Tuesday can hoard 5.5 tons of water and they are piloted by members of the country's air force.

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Twin Wildfires Near Athens Kill 20, Gut Vacation Resorts (Gatopoulos, Becatoros, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Derek Gatopoulos And Elena Becatoros

Gale-fanned wildfires raged through holiday resorts near Greece's capital, killing at least 20 people by early Tuesday and injuring more than 104, including 11 in serious condition, in the deadliest blaze to hit the country in more than a decade.

Greece sought international help through the European Union as the fires on either side of Athens left lines of cars torched, charred farms and forests, and sent hundreds of people racing to beaches to be evacuated by navy vessels, yachts and fishing boats.

Winds reached 80 kph (50 mph) as authorities deployed the country's entire fleet of water-dropping planes and helicopters to give vacationers time to escape. Military drones remained in the air in the high winds to help officials direct more than 600 firefighters below.

"We were unlucky. The wind changed and it came at us with such force that it razed the coastal area in minutes," said Evangelos Bourous, mayor of the port town of Rafina, a sleepy mainland port that serves Greek holiday islands.

The dock area became a makeshift hospital as paramedics checked survivors when they came off coast guard vessels and private boats. The operation continued through the night.

The fire posed no immediate threat to Greece's famed ancient monuments, but as it raged inland children's summer camps and holiday homes were hastily abandoned. Fleeing drivers clogged highways into Athens, hampering the firefighting effort.

It was the deadliest fire season to hit Greece in more than a decade. More than 60 people were killed in 2007 when huge fires swept across the southern Peloponnese region.

"It's a difficult night for Greece," Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said after flying back to Athens from a trip to Bosnia that was cut short.

Authorities said Cyprus and Spain offered assistance after the request for EU help was made.

Greek Fire Service officials issued public pleas for residents in fire-affected areas to comply with evacuation orders and not stay on in an effort trying to save their homes.

Rafina's mayor said he believed about 100 houses in that area had burned. The fire service was not able to confirm the figure.

Showers that passed over the Greek capital Monday missed the two big fires — one at Rafina, 30 kilometers (18 miles) to the east, and the other at Kineta, 55 kilometers (35 miles) to the west. Heavy rain is forecast across southern Greece on Wednesday.

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At Least 20 Dead In Greek Wildfires (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

At least 20 people have died and more than 100 injured after wildfires tore through woodland and villages around Athens, as Greek authorities rushed to evacuate residents and tourists stranded on beaches in coastal areas early Tuesday.

The majority of victims were found in their homes or cars in the seaside resort of Mati, 40 kilometres (25 miles) northeast of the capital, government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos said.

Eleven people were seriously injured, he added, while 16 of those injured were children.

Late Monday, an AFP photographer came across a burned out car and motorcycle with four charred bodies underneath them near the port town of Rafina, one of the worst affected areas about 40 kilometres east of Athens.

Authorities were trying to evacuate inhabitants, Tzanakopoulos said, while searches for further victims continued.

Nine coastal patrol boats, two military vessels and "dozens of private boats" assisted by army helicopters were mobilised to help those stuck in Rafina harbour.

Evacuees were transferred to hotels and military camps, while worried relatives flocked to the area.

Police in the town earlier said they found two Danish tourists out of a group of 10 in a boat at sea off the town and were trying to locate the others.

Civil protection chief Yannis Kapakis said he had told Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who cut short a visit to Bosnia to return home, that winds up to 100 kilometres an hour were creating "an extreme situation."

In the north of the country, more than 300 firefighters, five aircraft and two helicopters were mobilised to tackle the "extremely difficult" situation, Athens fire chief Achille Tzouvaras said.

The Greek government invoked European Union civil protection agreements to seek help from its EU peers, with the country tinder box dry and at risk of more fires. Blazes have caused widespread damage in Sweden and other northern European nations.

Video footage showed inhabitants fleeing the fires by car, with several buildings and homes damaged, as the region of Attica – where Athens is situated – declared a state of emergency.

"If I hadn't left, I'd have been burned," a 67-year-old resident who gave her name as Maria told AFP.

Near the town of Marathon, several residents fled to safety along the beach, while some 600 children were evacuated from holiday camps in the area.

Tsipras said "all emergency forces have been mobilised" to battle fires along at least three fronts.

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Emergency services were banking on a drop in the wind but the forecast for the region – which has experienced temperatures topping 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) – suggest conditions would remain challenging into Tuesday.

Smoke from the blazes blotted out the sun over the famed Parthenon temple in Athens, where some ministries closed Monday afternoon due to the soaring heat.

“I am really concerned by the parallel outbreak of these fires,” Tsipras said, with officials raising the possibility they could have been started deliberately by criminals out to ransack abandoned homes.

Fires are a common problem in Greece during the searing heat of the summer and can be major killers.

Fires in 2007 on the southern island of Evia claimed 77 lives.

– Sweden battles 27 fires –

Also on Monday, Sweden’s civil protection agency MSB said there were 27 active fires across the country, as temperatures were expected to soar as high as 35 Celsius this week.

Other European countries including France, Italy and Germany have sent a mix of planes, trucks and firefighters to help tackle the blazes as Sweden, where usual summer temperatures are closer to 23 Celsius, has struggled to contain the crisis.

Some 25,000 hectares (62,000 acres) of land has already gone up in smoke or continues to burn – an area twice the size of the city of Paris.

At least four of the fires had not been brought under control, MSB said, and weather conditions were unfavourable.

Sweden is experiencing an unprecedented drought and soaring temperatures which have reached the highest in a century.

– No rain since May –

There has been practically no rain since the beginning of May in the Nordic country, aside from a paltry 13 millimetres (half an inch) in mid-June.

The Forestry Bureau said in a statement Monday that the value of the destroyed forests was 900 million kronor (87 million euros, \$102 million).

Other northern European nations have been struggling to contain forest fires as the temperature shows no sign of dropping.

In Finland’s northernmost Lapland province, fires have ravaged woods and grassland close to the border with Russia.

Norway, which this year experienced its hottest May temperatures on record, has also seen several small fires, and one firefighter was killed on July 15 while trying to contain a blaze.

Fires have raged for five days in Latvia, destroying more than 800 hectares in the Baltic state’s western regions.

Meteorologists warned that the high temperatures are persisting and no rain is expected in Latvia for the next two weeks.

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Ryanair Cabin Crew To Strike Wednesday, Thursday (Boutreux, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Laurence Boutreux

With the busy summer season in full swing, Ryanair’s cabin crew are all set to go on strike Wednesday and Thursday in Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Italy, forcing the airline to cancel 600 flights.

Five unions are behind a stoppage affecting 100,000 passengers, forcing the no-frills airline either to reimburse their trips or offer them alternative flights.

According to the company, “90 percent of affected passengers have been transferred” to another flight.

Spain, the world’s second tourist destination after France, is the worst affected country.

The airline predicts the strike could affect “up to 200 of over 830 daily Ryanair flights” to and from there.

In Portugal and Belgium, Ryanair says the stoppage will affect up to 50 daily flights.

In Italy, unions have also called for a stoppage but the airline says its flights schedule there will not be affected.

Founded 33 years ago in Dublin, the Irish low-cost carrier has grown quickly and boasts lower costs per passenger than its competitors.

But employees have long slammed their working conditions and the airline has been hit by several strikes this year.

For Ryanair's chief marketing officer Kenny Jacobs, these "are entirely unjustified."

"Ryanair cabin crew enjoy great pay — up to 40,000 euros (\$47,000) p.a. (in countries with high youth unemployment) — industry leading rosters (14 days off each month), great sales commissions, uniform allowances and sick pay," he said in a statement.

But Spain's Antonio Escobar of the Sitcpla cabin crew union retorted: "In Italy, some 100 Ryanair cabin crew sent Ryanair a letter to claim the difference between the 17,000 euros they've earned and these 40,000 euros.

"The large majority of cabin crew don't have a base salary, which means if you don't fly, you don't get paid," he added.

— Unequal pay —

Unions want the airline to give contractors the same work conditions as its own employees.

"On board the same plane, for instance a Madrid to Charleroi flight, you will find four cabin crew members doing the same job but none will be earning the same," Escobar said.

One will be employed directly by Ryanair and the others by temporary work agencies, he added.

Unions are also asking that Ryanair staff be employed according to the national legislation of the country they operate in, rather than that of Ireland as is currently the case.

Earlier this month, a Dutch appeals court ruled Ryanair employees based in the Netherlands must be covered by Dutch law.

Ryanair argues that since its planes fly under the Irish flag and most of its employees work on board planes, its staff are covered by Irish law.

The Spanish government has called for Ryanair to provide a minimum service during the strike, as it is "the company that transports the most passengers in the Spanish market."

It wants Ryanair to guarantee "100 percent of flights" from mainland Spain to the Balearic or Canary Islands, as well as 59 percent of international flights.

It is unclear whether that will happen.

— Profit falls, jobs warning —

Ryanair on Monday reported first-quarter profit down more than a fifth on higher fuel costs and pilot salaries.

April to June profit after tax slid 22 percent to 309.2 million euros compared with a year earlier.

The airline expects more strikes over the summer "as we are not prepared to concede to unreasonable demands that will compromise either our low fares or our highly efficient model."

It warned that if they do continue, however, "we will have to review our winter schedule, which may lead to fleet reductions at disrupted bases and job losses".

In Lisbon, the SNPVAC cabin crew union is anticipating "strong participation" in the strike, spokesman Bruno Fialho said.

He said the mobilisation of cabin crew in other countries would "stop Ryanair from using other crew to replace those striking, as was the case during the last strike in Portugal," which lasted three days earlier this year.

In Belgium, "48 daily flights will be cancelled" at Charleroi airport, an airport spokesman told the Belga news agency.

On Friday, pilots in Ireland unhappy over pay and other conditions went on strike, resulting in the cancellation of 24 flights with the UK.

They had stopped work earlier this month and have called for a third day of strikes Tuesday.

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EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

North Korea Starts Dismantling Key Missile Facilities, Report Says (Sang-Hun, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Choe Sang-Hun

North Korea has started dismantling a missile-engine test site, as President Trump said the North's leader, Kim Jong-un, promised he would during their historic summit meeting in Singapore in June, according to an analysis of satellite imagery of the location.

The North Koreans have started taking apart the engine test stand at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station, said Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., an expert on North Korea's weapons programs, in a report published on Monday on the website 38 North. The dismantling work probably began sometime within the last two weeks, he said.

North Korea has also started dismantling a rail-mounted building at the Sohae station where workers used to assemble space launch vehicles before moving them to the launchpad, Mr. Bermudez said.

Mr. Bermudez compared satellite photos of the Sohae facilities taken on Friday and Sunday to conclude that North Korea had begun taking "an important first step toward fulfilling a commitment made by Kim Jong-un."

But it still remained unclear whether North Korea planned to raze the entire Sohae site in the country's northeast, which has been vital to its space program. In satellite images, other important facilities like fuel bunkers, a main assembly building and the gantry tower remain untouched.

But dismantling activities at Sohae could be an encouraging sign for the Trump administration, which has so far had little to show for its efforts to denuclearize North Korea.

"Since these facilities are believed to have played an important role in the development of technologies for the North's intercontinental ballistic missile program, these efforts represent a significant confidence-building measure on the part of North Korea," Mr. Bermudez said.

North Korea has used the Sohae facilities to launch its satellite-carrying rockets. Washington called the satellite program a front for developing intercontinental ballistic missiles. Mr. Kim visited the Sohae missile engine test site in March last year when engineers there successfully tested a new high-thrust engine that was believed to have powered intercontinental ballistic missiles the North launched months later.

Washington has been fretting over a lack of North Korean actions toward dismantling its nuclear and missile programs after the June 12 Singapore meeting, during which Mr. Kim made a general commitment to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Since his meeting with Mr. Kim, Mr. Trump has said that the North Korean nuclear crisis was largely over and that Mr. Kim planned to "get rid of certain ballistic missile sites and various other things."

But North Korea has not moved as quickly as Mr. Trump wished, and has accused Washington of making a "unilateral, gangster-like demand for denuclearization" while offering the North little in return, like improved ties.

In recent days, American news reports have quoted administration officials as saying Mr. Trump has privately expressed frustration with the progress of denuclearization efforts. But on Monday, he dismissed the reports, tweeting that he was "very happy" with the progress with North Korea, noting that the country had not conducted any nuclear or missile tests since late last year.

North Korea officially says it no longer needs nuclear or missile tests because it has completed building its nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles and begun mass-producing them. Some Western officials and analysts still doubt that the country has mastered the technologies needed for launching a reliable long-range missile to a target across an ocean.

North Korea has yet to explain what it meant by "complete denuclearization" — for instance, whether it would allow intrusive inspections by outside monitors to verify its actions.

Many analysts say North Korea will not have started denuclearizing until it begins dismantling its nuclear weapons. North Korea has not started disposing of its fissile materials or nuclear facilities, such as a nuclear reactor and centrifuges, that have been used to produce the weapons. Nor has it announced whether and when it will dismantle missiles that it says can deliver nuclear warheads.

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North Korea Said To Be Dismantling Key Parts Of Launch Site (Tong-Hyung, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Kim Tong-Hyung

North Korea appears to have started dismantling key facilities at its main satellite launch site in a step toward fulfilling a commitment made by leader Kim Jong Un at his summit with President Donald Trump in June.

While Pyongyang could be trying to build trust with Washington as they engage in talks to resolve the nuclear standoff, analysts say dismantling a few facilities at the site alone wouldn't realistically reduce North Korea's military capability or represent a material step toward denuclearization. And they expressed concern the work is being done without verification.

The North Korea-focused 38 North website said commercial satellite images between July 20 and 22 indicate the North began dismantling key facilities at the Sohae launch site. The facilities being razed or disassembled include a rocket engine test stand used to develop liquid-fuel engines for ballistic missiles and space-launch vehicles and a rail-mounted processing building where space launch vehicles were assembled before being moved to the launch pad, according to the report.

"Since these facilities are believed to have played an important role in the development of technologies for the North's intercontinental ballistic missile program, these efforts represent a significant confidence building measure on the part of North Korea," analyst Joseph Bermudez wrote in the report.

An official from South Korea's presidential office on Tuesday said Seoul has also been detecting dismantlement activities at the Sohae launch site but did not specify what the North was supposedly taking apart.

Other analysts said North Korea is giving up little in dismantling the rocket engine test site when it's clear the country is satisfied with its current design of long-range weapons and could easily build other similar facilities if needed in the future.

Adam Mount, a senior defense analyst at the Federation of American Scientists, said it's also troubling that the North has been apparently allowed to duck verification by unilaterally dismantling parts of its nuclear and missile facilities without the presence of international inspectors. North Korea in May invited foreign journalists to observe the destruction of tunnels at its nuclear testing ground, but did not invite outside experts capable of certifying what had been destroyed.

"The actions at Sohae are a helpful signal that Pyongyang wants to continue negotiations, but do not in themselves advance nuclear disarmament," Mount said in an email. "North Korea still has not disclosed or offered to dismantle facilities that produce or store nuclear or missile systems, or the means to transport the missiles. So far, the facilities dismantled have been peripheral to these core functions."

Lee Choon Geun, a missile expert at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute, said the North's supposed move to dismantle the rail-mounted processing building was the more meaningful development as it potentially indicated to broader dismantlement activities at the site.

"If North Korea goes further and dismantle the entire Sohae site, that would meaningfully reduce the country's long-range missile capability by eliminating a facility where it could fire multiple ICBMs in succession," Lee said. "The North can also fire ICBMs from transporter erector launchers, but their technology with these vehicles isn't stable."

However, Mount said the military consequences of a broader dismantlement would be "marginal." North Korea has invested a great deal of effort in ensuring its missiles can be fired from austere locations and doesn't require a site like Sohae, he said.

"Dismantling a test site does not seriously constrain the existing arsenal or even future designs," said Mount. "While it would be a significant step for the regime to shut down its space launch programs, it has always argued that these programs are distinct from military ones. Easing the missile threat would require restrictions on the number, types, or capabilities of missiles or the vehicles that transport and fire them."

After his summit with Kim in Singapore on June 12, Trump said he was told by Kim that the North was "already destroying a major missile engine testing site" without identifying which site. The leaders concluded their summit by declaring their vague aspirational goal of moving toward a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, but there's lingering doubts on whether Kim would ever agree to fully give up the nuclear weapons he may see as a stronger guarantee of his survival than whatever security assurances the United States can provide.

Kim in late 2017 declared his nuclear weapons and missile program was complete, following a torrent of nuclear and missile tests that include the detonation of a purported thermonuclear warhead and flight tests of three developmental ICBMs potentially capable of reaching the U.S. mainland. Kim announced the mission of his nuclear testing site as finished weeks before inviting foreign journalists to observe the destruction of the tunnels.

The South Korean presidential official, who didn't want to be named, citing office rules, said the supposed dismantlement activities

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shows the North is moving gradually.

"We need further analysis to figure out why the North didn't turn the dismantlement activities into an event and whether the country is trying to control the speed of the process to maintain a pace it wants," he said.

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Seoul Considers Reducing Troops Along N. Korea Border Zone (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

South Korea is considering withdrawing some troops from its border zone with North Korea as a confidence-building measure after their landmark summit, the defence ministry said Tuesday.

The ministry said it would withdraw some soldiers and equipment at guard posts inside the Demilitarised Zone on a trial basis, and consider a gradual expansion of the pullout later.

"We will push for plans for a full-scale withdrawal in sync with surveys of historical remains and ecological features," it said in a report to parliament.

The 1950-53 Korean War ended with an armistice rather than a peace treaty, leaving the two Koreas technically at war. The DMZ was designated as a buffer zone but the areas to the north and south of it are heavily fortified.

At their April summit, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the South's president Moon Jae-in agreed to cease all hostile acts and turn their border into a "peace zone".

Also under consideration is a joint programme with the North and the United States to exhume the remains of war dead buried in the DMZ.

The zone bisects the Korean peninsula and is about four kilometres (2.5 miles) wide. It includes a Joint Security Area (JSA) around the truce village of Panmunjom, where negotiations take place.

The ministry also said Seoul was reviewing plans to reduce guard personnel and firearms in the JSA, "based on the spirit of the armistice agreement".

North Korea's diplomatic overtures began earlier this year with its participation in the Winter Olympics in the South.

In June Kim held a historic summit with US President Donald Trump in Singapore at which he reaffirmed his commitment to work towards the "denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula".

After the summit, Trump declared the North Korean nuclear threat to be effectively over, although experts say Pyongyang has made no public commitment to give up its weapons.

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Taiwan To Cease Employing North Koreans On Fishing Boats (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Taiwan says it will stop employing North Korean workers on its fishing boats in compliance with U.N. sanctions on such contracts.

The foreign ministry said in a notice Tuesday that the last three North Koreans working on Taiwanese vessels would be put to shore at convenient ports by the end of the month and no others would be employed.

Taiwan is barred from the United Nations because China objects to the island participating in world bodies.

But the foreign ministry noted the self-governing democracy "consistently and actively adheres to international actions as a responsible member of international society."

It said that included complying with U.N. sanctions imposed on North Korea over its weapons programs. The sanctions include a requirement that countries not renew contracts for North Koreans working abroad.

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Trump Says ‘Very Happy’ With Progress In North Korea Talks (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

US President Donald Trump said Monday he was “very happy” with how talks were progressing with North Korea, as observers and the media highlight the lack of concrete results one month after his summit with Kim Jong Un.

“A Rocket has not been launched by North Korea in 9 months. Likewise, no Nuclear Tests. Japan is happy, all of Asia is happy,” Trump tweeted.

“But the Fake News is saying, without ever asking me (always anonymous sources), that I am angry because it is not going fast enough. Wrong, very happy!”

Trump appeared to be referring to an article in The Washington Post on Sunday that claimed the president was frustrated with the lack of immediate progress, despite his public statements claiming the talks were a success

The article cited unnamed White House aides, State Department officials and diplomats.

Trump hit out at the Post in a series of tweets on Monday, saying the paper, which is owned by Amazon boss Jeff Bezos had “gone crazy against” him.

“In my opinion the Washington Post is nothing more than an expensive (the paper loses a fortune) lobbyist for Amazon,” Trump said.

In a joint declaration after his historic summit with Trump on June 12 in Singapore, the North Korean leader “reaffirmed his commitment” to work towards the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

But the actual details of the process, including how and when the North’s nuclear program is to be dismantled, have yet to be hammered out.

[Video: Trump Says ‘No Rush’ to Dismantle NK’s Weapons Program](#) data-reactid=”31”>[Video: Trump Says ‘No Rush’ to Dismantle NK’s Weapons Program](#)

For more news videos visit Yahoo View. “ data-reactid=”34”>For more news videos visit Yahoo View.

A month ago, the US administration insisted on the “urgency” of denuclearization, and said it would begin “very quickly.”

“We’re hopeful we can get it done” by 2020, before the end of Trump’s term, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said at the time.

Pompeo has been charged with the challenge of putting meat on the bare bones of the Singapore commitment.

But 40 days and one apparently fruitless visit by Pompeo to Pyongyang later, the tone of the American side has clearly changed.

“We have no time limit,” Trump told reporters last week. “We have no speed limit.”

Asked about the change in tone, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert sought to reassure: “We have teams in place that are working very hard on this issue every day,” she said.

“We have said there’s a lot of work left to be done.”

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Trump Says He’s ‘Very Happy’ With North Korea Negotiations (Muñoz, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Gabriella Muñoz

President Trump denied reports that he’s frustrated with North Korea on Monday, saying that he and “all of Asia” are happy with the progress.

Mr. Trump said North Korea hasn’t launched a nuclear or ballistic missile test in months, keeping with the pledge made by the country in March to refrain during peace talks.

He criticized the media’s use of anonymous sources and publishing reports “without ever asking me.”

A Rocket has not been launched by North Korea in 9 months. Likewise, no Nuclear Tests. Japan is happy, all of Asia is happy. But the Fake News is saying, without ever asking me (always anonymous sources), that I am angry because it is not going fast enough. Wrong, very happy! — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

The Washington Post published the initial report Sunday. Anonymous sources told The Post that the president gets daily updates but is frustrated by the lack of progress and the media coverage.

Mr. Trump pushed back against The Post Monday, accusing the paper of being an “expensive lobbyist” for Amazon.

The Post’s John Hudson responded to the president’s tweet, saying the newspaper contacted the White House for comment “multiple times” before publishing.

Despite reports that North Korea is stalling on negotiations and has not begun breaking down nuclear testing sites, as promised, Mr. Trump continues to tout successful negotiations and a good relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

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Satellite Images Indicate North Korea Has Started Dismantling Primary Nuclear Test Site (Cheng, Gordon, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Jonathan Cheng And Michael R. Gordon

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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N. Korea Begins Dismantling Rocket Test Site: Analysts (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

North Korea appears to have started dismantling key facilities at a rocket-engine test center, a group of experts said Monday, potentially marking a significant step after last month’s summit between Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump.

According to the respected 38 North group, commercial satellite imagery of the Sohae satellite launching station indicates Pyongyang has begun taking down a processing building and a rocket-engine test stand that had been used to test liquid-fuel engines for ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles.

Sohae, on the northwest coast of North Korea, has been used to test rockets, with the aim of putting a satellite into orbit.

But rocket engines are easily repurposed for use in missiles and outside observers say nuclear-armed Pyongyang’s space program is a fig leaf for weapons tests.

38 North analyst Joseph Bermudez called the move an “important first step” for Kim in fulfilling commitments he made to Trump during their June summit in Singapore.

Since Sohae is “believed to have played an important role in the development of technologies for the North’s intercontinental ballistic missile program, these efforts represent a significant confidence-building measure on the part of North Korea,” Bermudez said.

A US defense official, however, told AFP that the Pentagon was not closely tracking activities at Sohae in terms of how it relates to the denuclearization of North Korea.

“It’s not on the radar, so to speak,” the official said.

On Monday, Trump said he was “very happy” with how talks were progressing with North Korea, after observers and the media highlighted an apparent lack of concrete results since the summit with Kim.

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North Korea Begins Dismantling Key Test Site, Satellite Imagery Suggests (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

North Korea has begun dismantling the facilities at the satellite launch station in Sohae, according to an analysis of commercial satellite imagery released on the 38 North website.

The Sohae location has been the main site for North Korean satellite launches since 2012. The testing facilities at the site are thought to play a role in the development of liquid-fuel engines that can also be used in North Korea’s ballistic missile program.

If the analysis of the satellite imagery is accurate, North Korea may be taking a small but significant step toward the disarmament

that was agreed upon by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and President Trump during a landmark meeting in Singapore on June 12.

After that summit, Trump said Kim had pledged to dismantle a missile site; U.S. officials later confirmed that the site that the U.S. president was referring to was Sohae. However, the lack of visible progress toward that pledge was one factor that soon served to undermine the agreements reached between Kim and Trump.

The images published by 38 North, a U.S.-based website focused on North Korea that is affiliated with the Stimson Center in Washington, were taken by the commercial companies Digital Globe and Airbus Defense and Space on July 20 and July 22, respectively.

In one set of images, it appears that a rail-mounted processing building is being dismantled. This building is where space launch vehicles are assembled before they are moved to the launchpad, according to 38 North analyst Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.

Separately, images show activity around a vertical engine test stand at Sohae. Bermudez notes that in the images from July 22, the test stand appears to have been “completely dismantled,” adding that “given the state of activity, work is likely to have begun sometime within the past two weeks.”

On Twitter, 38 North’s founder, Joel Wit, said the images suggested that North Korea may be willing to “give up its space launch program.” Wit, a former State Department negotiator with North Korea and a consistent advocate for dialogue with Pyongyang, said such a move would be just one step in the right direction, “but an important one.”

Notably, the timeline of the satellite images suggests that North Korea may have begun dismantling the facilities at Sohae after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Pyongyang in early July in a bid to make progress on the agreement reached in Singapore.

However, the dismantlement of the facilities at Sohae appears to have taken place without outside experts there to verify it. The North Korean government has made a number of such unilateral moves since the start of the year, including the apparent destruction of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in May. Analysts have cautioned that these steps need verification.

After a flurry of activity earlier in the year, there had been signs recently that ongoing denuclearization talks between the United States and North Korea were going slower than anticipated. U.S. intelligence officials said last month that Pyongyang was working to conceal key aspects of its nuclear program.

The Washington Post reported this past weekend that Trump, who had said last month that North Korea’s nuclear problem was “largely solved,” was now privately expressing concern about a lack of progress on the issue. On Monday, Trump tweeted that the story was “wrong” and that he was “very happy!”

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Companies See Glimmers Of Opportunity In North Korea (Cheng, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Jonathan Cheng

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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While Making Nice With US And South, North Korea Slams Japan (Talmadge, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Eric Talmadge

North Korea’s state-run media have toned down their rhetorical attacks on the United States and South Korea while leader Kim Jong Un pursues a more diplomatic approach, but the vitriol continues — and Japan is now Pyongyang’s favorite foil.

Commentaries critical of Tokyo, which has maintained a harder line toward Pyongyang than Seoul and Washington, have increased noticeably in recent weeks in a strategy aimed at driving a wedge between Japan and its allies.

Over the past few days, the North’s official media have chastised Japan for discriminating against its large ethnic Korean community and played up South Korean reports that protesters in Seoul threw eggs at the Japanese Embassy over Tokyo’s alleged attempts to take control over a disputed island that is a cause celebre for both North and South.

Pyongyang has also lambasted Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono for suggesting Japan could foot part of the bill for inspections to verify the North’s denuclearization process.

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Japan ruled the Korean Peninsula as a colony from 1910 to 1945 and the history of animosity between the neighbors goes back centuries. Tokyo and Pyongyang have never had formal diplomatic ties.

But North Korea's strategy of deliberately keeping Tokyo at arm's length has been particularly apparent over the past several months, as Kim has held summits with China, South Korea and the United States. He is expected to hold a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in September.

In a typical commentary late last week, the North Korean ruling party's daily newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, called Japan "impotent" in the political and diplomatic arena and said Kono was a "political charlatan."

"Japan is near to the Korean Peninsula. But Japan is a burglar that historically inflicted wars and misfortune and pain of colonial rule on Korea," it said before getting to North Korea's often repeated demand: "Japan should make a sincere apology and reparation for the past crimes."

Because it is state-run, North Korea's media offer a good barometer of Pyongyang's political climate. Since earlier this year, they have significantly cut back on negative commentaries directed at U.S. President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, presumably to avoid souring the North's ongoing diplomatic outreach toward both countries.

It has, however, reserved the right to lash out at some of their negotiators or policies without slamming the leaders themselves.

Pyongyang's game of hardball with Tokyo is calculated to play well in China and South Korea, which also harbor deep distrust toward Japan. Tokyo has clearly been relegated to a secondary role in the talks to persuade Kim to abandon his nuclear arsenal and bring his country more into the norms of the international community.

But while Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is also reportedly considering a one-on-one meeting with Kim, he has held surprisingly firm to a tough policy of maintaining economic and political pressure on the North. The Japanese leader could meet Kim at an eastern Russia development forum in Vladivostok in September, where Kim and Putin may hold their summit.

Abe's position is extremely delicate.

Public sentiment in Japan toward North Korea is generally negative. The North already has ballistic missiles that could be used to launch a conventional, biological or nuclear attack on Tokyo or other major cities, along with U.S. military bases throughout Japan where tens of thousands of American troops are deployed. Kim unilaterally announced a moratorium on long-range missile launches, pleasing Trump, but has pointedly said nothing about the mid-range missiles that concern Japan the most.

Abe is also committed to resolving a bitter dispute over more than a dozen Japanese citizens who were abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and '80s. Pyongyang insists that issue has been resolved.

Tokyo claims the North has not been fully transparent about the fate of the abductees and whether any are still alive.

The biggest hurdle, however, could well be the reparations issue, which some experts believe could cost Japan billions of dollars.

North Korea has long demanded that Japan pay for the damage it caused during its often brutal colonial rule. Although Japan claims that matter was settled long ago, the shifting ties between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington — and particularly efforts to formally declare an end to the 1950-53 Korean War — could put Tokyo under increased pressure to re-examine its own past or be left out in the cold.

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Samsung, Workers Agree To End Standoff On Workers' Deaths (Lee, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Youkyung Lee

Samsung Electronics and a group representing ailing Samsung computer chip and display factory workers said Tuesday they have agreed to end a years-long standoff over compensation for deaths and grave illnesses among Samsung workers.

Samsung and Banolim said they will unconditionally accept terms of compensation and apologies to be drafted over the next two months by a mediator.

Banolim said it will stop its protests outside Samsung buildings, where its supporters camped out for nearly three years to demand that Samsung apologize for making workers sick and provide compensation for their illnesses.

The agreement represents a breakthrough in a more than decade-old civic movement that raised awareness about the health risks from toiling in the lucrative semiconductor industry.

The grassroots movement was started by Hwang Sang-gi, a taxi driver who refused to accept a settlement when his daughter Yu-mi died of leukemia in 2007 at the age of 23 after working at a Samsung chip factory. Hwang's search for the cause of Yu-mi's death galvanized a broader movement to hold businesses and the government accountable for safety lapses in the chip and display industries, which use huge amounts of chemicals.

"It's regrettable that for more than 10 years we could not solve the problem of workers who had no money and no power and died from diseases due to chemicals," Hwang said at a signing ceremony attended by the mediator and Samsung, wiping away tears. "But it is fortunate that we found a way to solve the problem of industrial diseases at Samsung."

More than 100 Samsung workers have reported grave illnesses such as leukemia but only a few won government recognition and compensation for suffering industrial diseases. Increasingly, workers denied such recognition and compensation have won court victories in recent years.

Judges have acknowledged the need and the importance of using state funds to aid the sickened workers even when they were unable to prove why and how they became ill, sometimes due to a lack of information about the chemicals they were exposed to.

Kim Sunsig, a senior vice president at Samsung Electronics, said accepting the proposal without condition was a difficult decision for Samsung.

"Only the complete resolution of the problem would be a consolation to the sickened workers and their families and also valuable for the society," Kim said. "We will actively cooperate with the mediation committee."

It's a step closer to resolving one of the company's biggest headaches as its leader Lee Jae-yong, a vice chairman and a grandson of Samsung's founder, solidifies his leadership.

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UN Security Council Urges Myanmar To Ease Rohingyas' Safe Return (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

The United Nations Security Council on Monday urged Myanmar to step up efforts for Rohingya refugees to return to the country safely and voluntarily.

During a closed-door meeting, the 15 council members called for more social and economic development aid and facilitating the return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes in Rakhine state.

"The members of the Security Council continued to stress the importance of undertaking independent and transparent investigations into allegations of human rights abuses and violations," a statement read.

The UN envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, said the government was favorable toward a return to Rakhine for the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas who fled the area.

Government authorities "declared really openly that they want to bring them back," Burgener said.

But she noted that tensions remain in Rakhine between Rohingyas – a Muslim minority – and the Buddhist majority.

"So they want to bring them back but they have to come back voluntarily, safe, in dignity and in a sustainable manner," said Burgener.

Talks with Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi were "very constructive, very open, very friendly," the envoy added.

Burgener said that Suu Kyi, who has been criticized internationally for her handling of the crisis, "is aware about the difficulties and challenges."

The envoy has traveled to Myanmar twice since taking office two months ago and is set to visit the country again in September, with plans to travel to other states in the country.

In late August 2017, rebels from the Rohingya Muslim community took up arms, denouncing the ill-treatment of this stateless minority in Myanmar.

More than 700,000 ethnic Rohingya have fled an offensive by Myanmar troops launched nearly a year ago in reprisal for attacks on border posts by Rohingya rebels.

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UN Urges Myanmar To Create Conditions For Rohingya Return (Lederer, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Edith M. Lederer

The U.N. Security Council urged Myanmar's government on Monday to step up efforts to create conditions that will allow Rohingya Muslims who fled a violent crackdown to safely return to the country from neighboring Bangladesh.

The council stressed in a statement following closed briefings that progress is also needed by Myanmar on implementing agreements on relations with the U.N. refugee and development agencies and with Bangladesh on returning Rohingya.

Rohingya face official and social discrimination in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, which denies most of them citizenship and basic rights because they are looked on as immigrants from Bangladesh, even though the families of many settled in Myanmar generations ago. Dire conditions led more than 200,000 to flee the country between 2012 and 2015.

The latest crisis began with attacks by Rohingya insurgents on Myanmar security personnel last August. The military responded with counterinsurgency sweeps and was accused of widespread human rights violations, including rape, murder, torture and the burning of Rohingya homes. Thousands are believed to have died and about 700,000 fled to Bangladesh. The U.N. and U.S. officials have called the government's military campaign ethnic cleansing.

Security Council members again stressed "the importance of undertaking transparent and independent investigations in allegations of human rights abuses and violations."

The new U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, said Myanmar's leaders want to bring Rohingya back to Rakhine state, but there are not only divisions between the government and Rohingya, but divisions between that Muslim minority and the rest of Rakhine's mostly Buddhist population.

The council "stressed the need to step up efforts, including through providing assistance to the social and economic development, in order to create conditions conducive to the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes in Rakhine state."

Burgener, who started the job two months ago, said she has traveled widely, met government officials including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi three times and has gotten approval to open a small office in Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw. She said she plans to return to Myanmar in September.

"I need dialogue, and for that I need open doors," she said, including to discuss "critical questions" and advise the government on "how they can also change the attitude of the communities on the ground."

Several Security Council members have called for the U.N.'s most powerful body to impose sanctions to pressure the government on the Rohingya issue, but China, a close ally of Myanmar and a veto-wielding council member, is highly unlikely to ever agree.

Burgener told reporters, "I think Myanmar is not a country which is reacting quite on pressure, but it's up to the Security Council."

Sweden's U.N. ambassador, Olof Skoog, the current council president, stressed the importance of council unity, though he said his country thinks progress has been "far too slow."

"I think there is a recognition among Security Council members that there have been positive steps taken lately. It's also fair to say that many of those steps are far from sufficient," Skoog said. "As long as the council is unified in terms of engagement, but also on putting pressure, I think we are making progress slowly."

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China: Tibetan Students Banned From Religious Activities (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Children in traditionally Buddhist Tibet have been banned from taking part in religious activities over the summer holidays, an official Chinese Communist Party newspaper has reported.

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The Global Times quoted an education official in the regional capital of Lhasa as saying that students were required to sign an agreement to "not take part in any form of religious activity" during the break.

The policy appears to reflect increasingly harsh restrictions on the Himalayan region's traditional Buddhist culture, largely aimed at reducing the influence of the region's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, who lives in exile in India.

"The students are following the regulation under the guidance of their parents and teachers," the paper said, quoting Choephel, the head of the political education department at Lhasa Middle School, who like many Tibetans uses just one name.

No phone number was available for the department and Chinese authorities severely limit foreign journalists' access to Tibet. The report was viewed on the paper's website on Tuesday.

China claims Tibet has been part of its territory for more than seven centuries and regards the Dalai Lama as a dangerous separatist.

Many Tibetans insist they were essentially independent before the Communist Party's People's Liberation Army's battled its way into the Himalayan region in 1950.

The presence of security forces was increased significantly after deadly anti-government rioting broke out in Lhasa in 2008 and spread quickly through Tibetan-inhabited areas in western China.

Buddhist religious institutions that form the backbone of the region's culture have become a particular target of the authorities.

The overseas-based International Campaign for Tibet reported earlier this month that young Tibetan monks were forced to leave one of the biggest monasteries in a Tibetan region of western China as part of a drive to replace monastic life with secular education.

That threatens to cut the transmission of religious knowledge and monastic tradition between monks of different generations, the organization said.

Recent months have also seen sweeping crackdowns on traditional Muslim culture among the Uighur ethnic minority group in the northwestern region of Xinjiang and among Christians in eastern China.

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China Unveils New Measures To Aid Growth Amid Trade Uncertainty (BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

China unveiled a package of policies to boost domestic demand as trade tensions threaten to worsen the nation's economic slowdown, sending stocks higher.

From a tax cut aimed at fostering research spending to special bonds for infrastructure investment, the measures announced late Monday following a meeting of the State Council in Beijing are intended to form a more flexible response to "external uncertainties" than had been implied by budget tightening already in place for this year.

Fiscal policy should now be "more proactive" and better coordinated with financial policy, according to the statement – a signal that the finance ministry will step up its contribution to supporting growth alongside the central bank. The People's Bank of China has cut reserve ratios three times this year and unveiled a range of measures for the private sector and small businesses.

With the economic impact of reciprocal tariffs on trade with the U.S. as yet unclear and no end to the trade dispute in sight, policy makers are pulling multiple levers to stabilize the economy. For now, that's being done without resorting to large-scale stimulus or broad-based monetary easing, as officials remain committed to a multi-year campaign to curb debt growth.

"I don't think there is a significant easing or a policy U-turn; it's more of a fine-tuning," said Larry Hu, head of China economics at Macquarie Securities in Hong Kong. "Policy makers are sewing patches, offsetting the deleveraging drive that was too rapid and fierce."

The onshore yuan fell as much as 0.65 percent to 6.8295 per dollar, the lowest level since June 2017. Stocks in Shanghai and Hong Kong advanced.

Nomura Holdings Inc. said the statement signals "the start of fiscal stimulus," Guotai Junan Securities Co. said it "confirmed the easing bias in monetary policy," and Deutsche Bank AG views it "as a confirmation of policy stance changing toward loosening."

Standard Chartered Bank Plc said policies will be slightly looser to support domestic demand but that there is no intention to introduce large stimulus.

The meeting reiterated language that China will strike a balance between easing and tightening and keep liquidity "reasonable and sufficient." It also pledged to improve the transmission of monetary policy, a phrase the PBOC had dropped since a campaign to curb credit growth started in late 2016.

While there hasn't been an official shift from the central bank's "prudent and neutral" policy, steps announced in recent days indicate that officials are taking a supportive stance amid the trade dispute with the U.S. They include Monday's record injection of funding for banks and the publishing of new guidelines for the asset management industry.

The economy grew 6.7 percent in the second quarter, the slowest expansion since 2016. Expansion is forecast to slow this year to 6.5 percent, in line with the official target.

China's Piecemeal Shift to Looser Monetary Policy Gathers Pace

The meeting also called for faster investment growth and steady financing to local investment projects. Policy makers stressed they'd refrain from using stimulus to flood the economy.

"It is now quite clear that Beijing has fully shifted its policy stance from the original deleveraging towards fiscal stimulus that will be underpinned by monetary and credit easing," said Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura Holdings Inc. in Hong Kong.

The policy package contained measures that included giving an additional tax cut of 65 billion yuan (\$9.6 billion) to companies with R&D expenditure, expediting non-budgeted special bond sales to assist local government infrastructure financing and easing restrictions on banks' issuance of financial bonds for small firms.

Private investment is to be boosted by introducing projects in transport, gas, and telecommunications, local governments will be pushed to make better use of untapped fiscal funds, and policies to attract foreign businesses to re-invest will be improved together with further opening up.

Policies also will seek to guide financial institutions to ensure reasonable funding to local government financing vehicles so that necessary projects aren't held up, to facilitate construction and planning of a number of big projects that will meet development purposes and public demand and accelerate fundamental research and core technology breakthroughs.

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China's Path To Free Capital Markets Hindered By U.S. Tension (BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

U.S. President Donald Trump's efforts to prise open China's markets are likely to be counterproductive, at least as far as capital controls are concerned.

Under a plan announced in 2016, China aimed to allow "basic capital account convertibility," or free non-speculative cross-border investment flows, by 2020. The likelihood of that happening has fallen to 10 percent, according to Xia Le, chief Asia economist at Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria SA.

While China's path to liberated capital markets has always looked rocky, especially after the central bank burned through \$1 trillion of foreign reserves fighting a plunge in the yuan in 2015-2016, the specter of a currency war on top of a trade dispute is increasing the chances of direct intervention.

The trade war "brings a lot of uncertainties, and the authorities will probably become more discretionary between 'managing' and 'letting market forces decide,'" said Shen Jianguang, chief Asia economist at Mizuho Securities Asia Ltd.

The yuan has tumbled more than 7 percent since the end of the first quarter as trade tensions worsened and weak economic data spurred a shift toward monetary easing. The speed of the decline, especially since Trump announced tariffs on \$34 billion of Chinese shipments on June 15, has led to speculation that the Chinese government is using the currency as a weapon to offset the impact of levies.

Even so, a sudden acceleration in yuan weakness could prompt heavier intervention by policy makers and set back reform efforts, BBVA's Xia said.

"The yuan is set to fall in the second half, and the central bank is likely to step up intervention if it approaches the range from 6.8 to 7, a key psychological level," said Larry Hu, a Hong Kong-based economist at Macquarie Securities Ltd. "The PBOC's bottom line is to prevent self-fulfillment in depreciation. It remains a key challenge for China to achieve free floating."

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China Says It Has ‘No Desire’ To Devalue Yuan Amid Trade War (BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

China has no desire to boost its exports through competitive devaluation while the nation’s sound economic fundamentals are providing support to the currency, a spokesman said on Monday as U.S. President Donald Trump took issue with the yuan’s month-long losing streak.

“The exchange rate of China’s RMB is determined by the market. There are ups and downs. It’s a two-way float,” Geng Shuang, foreign ministry spokesman, said at a regular briefing in Beijing when asked to comment on Trump’s remarks on the yuan.

China operates a managed floating exchange rate. Inside China, the yuan can trade 2 percent on either side of a daily fixing set by the central bank; a freely traded offshore rate tends to track it.

The U.S. president’s charges that China is “manipulating” a currency that’s been “dropping like a rock” came at the end of a six-week slide that took it to its lowest level in more than a year against the dollar. Trump said this is “taking away our big competitive edge.”

The president also said he’s “ready to go” with new tariffs on \$500 billion of Chinese imports, which would be roughly the value of all Chinese goods imported to the U.S. last year. That’s a sign that the brewing trade war between the world’s two largest economies is nowhere near an easy end.

“Threats and intimidation will never work on our Chinese people and we are confident of our ability to uphold our interests,” said Geng, urging the U.S. to “remain calm and rational.”

“The U.S. is bent on provoking this trade war. China does not want a trade war but we are not afraid of one,” he said.

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China Premier Orders Probe Of Vaccine Makers After Violation (BLOOM)

Sunday, July 22, 2018

Bloomberg News

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang ordered the government to investigate the nation’s vaccine industry after violations found at a biologics manufacturer heightened concerns about drug safety.

Shares of vaccine makers tumbled in Shanghai after Li said China will crack down on crimes that endanger people’s lives and hold perpetrators responsible. The premier’s order came following an outcry on social media after Changsheng Bio-Technology Co. was found to have fabricated production and inspection data on a rabies vaccine, as well as violations in the manufacturing of an infant vaccine. China’s drug regulator will vet all vaccine makers, China Central Television reported.

Demand for vaccines in China is on the rise, driven by loosened family planning policies, increasing awareness and an aging population. The country’s 30 billion yuan (\$4.4 billion) vaccine market is expected to double by 2021. The rapid growth of the vaccines market has also been tainted with safety issues, with consumers in an uproar in 2016 over expired vaccines being sold nationally.

Shares Suspended

Changsheng suspended trading in its shares in Shenzhen on Monday pending an announcement. The biologics manufacturer, based in the northeastern city of Changchun, said July 16 it had halted production and recalled a rabies vaccine under orders from the government. The company’s shares fell by the 10 percent daily limit every day last week.

Changsheng Bio-Tech is also under scrutiny for producing and selling poor quality infant vaccines, after China’s drug regulator last year found violations in its manufacturing of a childhood vaccine that protects against tetanus, whooping cough and diphtheria. The company said last week it was fined about 3 million yuan for the infant-vaccine violations, and has stopped production..

The company, which has a market capitalization of more than \$2 billion, issued an apology to vaccine users and investors in a statement to the stock exchange Sunday evening.

Vaccine Demand

Many vaccine companies fell by the daily limit on Monday. Shenzhen Kangtai Biological Products Co., which produces vaccines against hepatitis B and pneumonia, lost 10 percent. Chongqing Zhifei Biological Products Co., the marketing partner in China for

Merck & Co.'s Gardasil vaccine against the human papilloma virus that can cause cervical cancer, also dropped 10 percent. Both have seen their share prices jump more than 57 percent this year on growing demand for vaccines.

In the 2016 vaccines scandal, more than 200 people were detained after an investigation revealed improperly stored or expired vaccines had been illegally sold throughout the country. Product safety is a key issue in the country, where consumers still remember a tainted-milk scandal that poisoned thousands of children a decade ago. At the same time, China has overhauled regulations to bring innovative new drugs to the world's second-largest pharmaceutical market.

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In China, Vaccine Scandal Infuriates Parents And Tests Government (Hernández, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Javier C. Hernández

Chinese parents were in an uproar on Monday after reports that hundreds of thousands of children might have been injected with faulty vaccines, the latest scandal to hit the nation's troubled drug industry.

The outcry came after a government investigation and news reports showed that a major drug producer in northeast China, Changchun Changsheng, had violated standards in making at least 250,000 doses of vaccine for diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough.

While there have been no reports of deaths or illnesses related to the substandard vaccines, the news has rattled public confidence in the government and rekindled fears that corruption and abuse in the nation's vast pharmaceutical industry are placing ordinary people at risk. It has also undermined President Xi Jinping's efforts to restore faith in medicine produced in China at a time when the country is striving to become a leading producer of pharmaceuticals.

After a series of scandals involving tainted food and drugs in China, many parents said they were fed up and called on the government to take more severe action.

"We always say that kids are the nation's future, but if we can't ensure the safety of such a future, what does the future hold for us?" said Huo Xiaoling, 37, who works in marketing in eastern China and has a 1-year-old daughter who received a vaccine made by Changchun Changsheng.

Ms. Huo said she would no longer buy Chinese-made vaccines because she could not trust officials to clean up the industry.

"We don't know who we can believe in," she said. "As Chinese, we probably should have confidence in our country, but getting hurt again and again has made us lose faith."

Mr. Xi has sought to justify his centralization of power by delivering an efficient and ethical government, but a series of medical scandals has deepened grievances about the health care system and resurrected complaints about government secrecy, especially among the rapidly growing middle class.

On Monday, Mr. Xi struggled to contain public anger over the scandal, the third crisis involving vaccines since 2010. In a statement on Monday while visiting Rwanda, he called the events "terrible and shocking" and said the government would "investigate to the very bottom."

Still, many parents were skeptical about the government's response. As of Monday evening, a hashtag referring to the scandal had received tens of millions of views on Weibo, a popular social media platform.

One image circulating online showed a screenshot of a news item touting a promise from Premier Li Keqiang on Sunday to "resolutely crack down on all illegal and criminal acts that endanger the safety of people's lives."

Next to it was a similar statement that Mr. Li offered after another vaccine scandal in 2016, suggesting the government had done nothing to address the problem.

"I hope they don't bitterly disappoint the people again," one Weibo user wrote.

Changchun Changsheng, the fast-growing company at the center of the scandal, also came under attack. The company, which is based in the northeastern province of Jilin, had more than \$235 million in revenue last year, according to Chinese news reports, and it is listed on the Shenzhen stock exchange.

Government investigators said this month that the company had produced more than 250,000 substandard doses of a vaccine for diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough, and that it had fabricated data related to the production of rabies vaccine.

In social media posts, parents denounced the company for “pursuing profits over public health.” Some said employees shown to have broken the law should receive the death penalty. “If you hurt our children,” one user wrote on Weibo, “we’ll ask for your life.”

The company’s leaders apologized in a statement on Sunday, saying they felt “deeply ashamed.” Under pressure from the government, the company has halted production and recalled its vaccines.

Chinese officials have made pharmaceutical innovation a national priority, and vaccines are now a booming industry, with more than \$3 billion in revenue each year.

But persistent safety problems have raised questions about the industry’s growth. This month, the Food and Drug Administration in the United States announced a voluntary recall of a popular blood pressure medication made in China.

Analysts said that greater regulation of China’s drug industry would be likely to hurt profits and to lead more Chinese consumers to choose foreign-made vaccines. Shares of Chinese vaccine producers and biotech companies fell sharply on Monday.

Public health experts worry that the scandal may prompt Chinese families to opt out of vaccinations, even though they are required by law. The government has said that children who received faulty vaccines should be taken to a hospital to receive another immunization.

“It takes years to build up confidence and one scandal to break it,” said Ashish K. Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute.

The Chinese news media also warned of the dangers of turning away from vaccines.

“This incident could become a public health crisis should it not be handled in a reasonable and transparent manner,” said an editorial in China Daily, a state-run English-language newspaper. “The government needs to act as soon as possible to let the public know it is resolved to address the issue and will punish any wrongdoers without mercy.”

After a similar scandal in 2016, involving about two million improperly stored vaccines that were sold around the country, many parents voiced concerns about the reliability of vaccines and said they were reluctant to risk further vaccinations for their children.

The Beijing office of the World Health Organization declined to comment on Monday.

As news of the scandal spread on social media, many parents rushed to check their children’s immunization records.

Zhang Zhiqian, 32, said his 3-year-old daughter had been given vaccines made by Changchun Changsheng in 2015. He said he wanted to take part in the government’s inquiry because he had lost faith in officials to regulate the industry.

“I don’t believe in their internal top-down investigation,” said Mr. Zhang, from the northern city of Shijiazhuang. “It’s easy to tell that most other parents don’t trust them either.”

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Philippines Peace Deal Hits Last-Minute Snag (Watts, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Jake Maxwell Watts

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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‘Your Concern Is Human Rights, Mine Is Human Lives,’ Duterte Says In Fiery Speech (Villamor, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Felipe Villamor

Philippine lawmakers were unable to ratify a deal on Monday that would have ended a yearslong Muslim rebellion, denying President Rodrigo Duterte the chance to announce a piece of positive news in an annual speech he delivered to Congress in Manila.

Deprived of that opportunity, Mr. Duterte, 73, used much of his third annual State of the Nation address to defend his deadly war on drug users and dealers, saying he would not be cowed by human rights advocates.

“When illegal drug operations turn nasty and bloody, advocates of human rights mock our law enforcers and this administration to no end,” he said. “Sadly, I have yet to really hear howls of protest from human rights advocates and church leaders against drug lordism, drug dealing and drug pushing as forceful and vociferous.”

"Your concern is human rights," Mr. Duterte added. "Mine is human lives."

Mr. Duterte, who has faced international opprobrium for the drug crackdown, had hoped to use the State of the Nation address to announce an autonomy agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a separatist group.

But a leadership dispute in the House of Representatives scuttled a vote on that legislation, known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law. Instead, Mr. Duterte promised that the law would be ratified within 48 hours.

Manila brokered a deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front four years ago, but Congress has yet to pass the legislation that would give Muslims an autonomous region in the restive southern part of the Philippines, a predominantly Roman Catholic country.

That left Mr. Duterte to concentrate on his anti-narcotics push. "The war against illegal drugs is far from over," he said. "Where before the war resulted in the seizure of illegal drugs worth millions of pesos, today they run into billions in peso value."

Senator Risa Hontiveros, a vocal critic of the president, said Mr. Duterte's speech was well delivered but short on facts.

"We know the real state of the nation," Ms. Hontiveros said. "The widespread killings, corruption, sexism and the surrender of our islands."

Thousands of activists protested in Manila before the president's speech. But despite criticism from opposition politicians and international organizations, Mr. Duterte remains popular in the Philippines, said Ramon C. Casiple, a political analyst with the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform, a research and advocacy group.

"I think the support for his antidrug campaign is still high," Mr. Casiple said, but "he needs to do more for economic inclusivity concerns."

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'Unprecedented' Japan Heatwave Kills 65 In One Week (Hasegawa, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Kyoko Hasegawa

An "unprecedented" heatwave in Japan has killed at least 65 people in one week, government officials said Tuesday, with the weather agency now classifying the record-breaking weather as a "natural disaster."

In the week to Sunday at least 65 people died of heat stroke while 22,647 people were hospitalised, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said in a statement.

Both figures are "the worst-ever for any week during summer" since the agency began recording fatalities resulting from heat stroke in July 2008, an agency spokesman told AFP.

The Fire and Disaster Management Agency said Tuesday that a total of 80 people have died from the heat since the beginning of July, and over 35,000 have been hospitalised.

Among those killed was six-year-old school boy who lost consciousness on his way back from a field trip.

"As a record heatwave continues to blanket the country, urgent measures are required to protect the lives of schoolchildren," top government spokesman Yoshihide Suga told reporters Tuesday.

The government said it would supply funds to ensure all schools are equipped with air conditioners by next summer.

Less than half of Japan's public schools have air conditioning, and the figure is only slightly higher at public kindergartens.

Suga said the government would also consider extending this year's summer school holidays as the heatwave drags on.

On Monday, the city of Kumagaya in Saitama outside Tokyo set a new national heat record, with temperatures hitting 41.1 Celsius (106 degrees Fahrenheit).

And temperatures over 40 degrees were registered for the first time in Tokyo's metro area, where the government is promoting Uchimizu, a tradition where water is sprinkled onto the ground, as part of a summer heat awareness campaign.

It was marginally cooler on Tuesday – 36 degrees in Tokyo according to the national weather agency – but temperatures remained well above normal in most of the country, and little relief is forecast.

"We are observing unprecedented levels of heat in some areas," weather agency official Motoaki Takekawa said late Monday.

The heatwave "is fatal, and we recognise it as a natural disaster," he told reporters.

The agency warned that much of the country will continue baking in temperatures of 35 degrees or higher until early August.

Officials have urged people to use air conditioning, drink sufficient water and rest often.

Japan's summers are notoriously hot and humid, and hundreds of people die each year from heatstroke, particularly the elderly in the country's ageing society.

The heatwave follows record rainfall that devastated parts of western and central Japan with floods and landslides that killed over 220 people.

And many people in the affected areas are still living in damaged homes or shelters and working outdoors on repairs, putting them at great risk.

The record-breaking weather has revived concerns about the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which will be held in two years time in July and August.

Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike this week promised that the heat would be given the same priority as measures to counter terrorism.

"It's just as important because the purpose is also to protect people's lives," she told reporters, comparing Japan's summer to "living in a sauna".

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Temperature Hits Record High In Japan As Nation Withers (Rich, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Motoko Rich

The temperature in a Japanese city outside Tokyo hit a high of close to 106 degrees on Monday, a record for Japan as the country suffered under a weekslong heat wave that has also afflicted the Korean Peninsula.

With rescue workers still clearing out debris after deadly floods that hit western Japan this month, the heat blanketed a large part of the country, turning 2018 into a summer of environmental misery.

Already, 21 people have died from heatstroke in Japan, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency, while thousands more have been taken to hospitals for heat-related reasons, with no relief in sight for the rest of the week.

About half of those hospitalized are over 65 years old. A 6-year-old boy was among the youngest to die, falling unconscious last week after an insect-hunting expedition at school in the city of Toyota in Aichi Prefecture.

The death toll is likely to rise significantly since the disaster management agency counts only deaths recorded by ambulances taking patients to a hospital. Many more people die at home or after a few days in the hospital, and a final fatality count will be based on medical death certificates.

In Korea, temperatures have not yet broken records, but heatstroke has already claimed 10 lives, including those of two young children.

In Japan, morning news shows regularly feature advice on how to stay cool and warning citizens to stay inside with air-conditioning.

The record temperature for Japan was set on Monday in Kumagaya, a city in Saitama, a suburban region outside Tokyo. The temperature was slightly higher than the previous record of 105 degrees, set in the city of Shimanto in Kochi Prefecture in 2013.

On social media, users posted comparisons with temperatures in global hot spots like Libya, Death Valley in California and Djibouti, all of which recorded lower temperatures than the record set in Kumagaya on Monday.

The heat has added to the suffering caused by deadly floods two weeks ago in southwestern Japan. The floods killed 225 people, and roughly 4,500 are still living in temporary shelters. The heat has made the task of clearing debris and shoveling mud from flood-stricken areas even more unpleasant and put people at risk of heatstroke.

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A Road Runs Through Matt Lauer's New Zealand Ranch. Access Is An Issue (Graham-McClay, NYT)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

New York Times

By Charlotte Graham-McLay

Matt Lauer, the former “Today” show co-host, is seeking to have New Zealand’s government pay him hundreds of thousands of dollars if he is forced to let more hikers and hunters use his ranch to get to a picturesque conservation park.

Mr. Lauer bought a lease to the 16,000-acre, \$9 million Hunter Valley Station ranch in February 2017 through a New Zealand-based company, months before he was fired by NBC in November over accusations of sexual misconduct.

A co-host at “Today” for two decades, Mr. Lauer was fired after a colleague complained about inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace. A subsequent internal review found that other women had lodged complaints about his behavior.

Hunter Valley Station, in New Zealand’s South Island, is the only thoroughfare to Hawea Conservation Park. A public official who is advocating greater public access to the park called it “one of the jewels of the New Zealand landscape.”

The official, Eric Pyle, chief executive of the government’s Walking Access Commission, said passage through Hunter Valley Station to the park had been fraught for decades. Mr. Lauer had allowed the minimum amount of public access required by his lease when he bought it, officials said.

Mr. Pyle said the commission felt it was important to grant greater public access, as the conservation park was “essentially landlocked” without access through Mr. Lauer’s ranch. He said hunters, fishers and hikers wanted permission to use a 25-mile gravel road that passed through the property.

“Otherwise it’s a long way to carry a deer,” said Mr. Pyle, whose commission has asked New Zealand’s Commissioner of Crown Lands to make a ruling on allowing increased public access to Mr. Lauer’s ranch.

Graeme Todd, Mr. Lauer’s lawyer in New Zealand, said in an email that Mr. Lauer’s company would appeal any public access ruling through the New Zealand courts. If that failed, the law allowed for the leaseholder to receive compensation.

Mr. Todd added that if compensation were paid, his client would request “hundreds of thousands” of dollars, “if not more.”

He said Mr. Lauer had allowed 100 people access to his property and had only denied three, though others had used the land without asking.

Mr. Lauer told Radio New Zealand that the groups trying to get access were taking advantage of the “difficult times” he went through in losing his job, and were targeting him because he was an “easy mark.”

Mr. Pyle of the Walking Access Commission said that public access to Mr. Lauer’s ranch “would not be unfettered.” He noted that similar access had been allowed through other nearby properties, including two leased by the record producer Mutt Lange, who was previously married to Shania Twain.

“One of the things we’d be very happy with would be if Mutt Lange and Matt Lauer could meet, and Matt could learn from that; learn the value that could be obtained from being a great member of the community,” Mr. Pyle said, adding that Mr. Lauer would be “held in very high regard in New Zealand” if he allowed more access.

Mr. Lauer’s lease on the property was put in jeopardy after his firing from the “Today” show, when New Zealand’s government conducted a six-month investigation into whether he met the “good character” test that foreigners must pass to lease land in New Zealand.

The inquiry concluded that since Mr. Lauer had not been charged with a crime, primarily lived in the United States and was not involved in the New Zealand ranch’s day-to-day operations, he would be allowed to keep the property. But officials who conducted the investigation said they “did not condone the inappropriate way” Mr. Lauer had behaved while at NBC, and that it would “continue to monitor the matter.”

New Zealand’s acting prime minister, Winston Peters, told Radio New Zealand on Tuesday that he was adamant Mr. Lauer not receive any public money if he were forced to provide greater public access to the land.

Mr. Peters said the Overseas Investment Office, which approved granting the lease to Mr. Lauer, dropped the ball when it had failed to fully negotiate public access before agreeing to the deal.

Official documents released to Stuff.co.nz under a freedom of information request revealed that officials had discussed “crowdfunding” compensation for Mr. Lauer if any were awarded. One official suggested that the possibility of compensating Mr. Lauer was complicated by the fact he was a “a very wealthy American with a tarnished reputation,” referring to his firing.

But Mr. Pyle from the Walking Access Commission said he had not yet spoken to Mr. Lauer personally, and hoped a solution could still be found.

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"We'd be very pleased to have the conversation with Matt," he said. "I'd strongly encourage Matt to pick up the phone and say, 'How can we work through this?'"

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Top US, Australian Officials Meet In San Francisco Bay Area (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

U.S. talks with North Korea and trade tensions with China were among the topics U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis were expected to discuss with their Australian counterparts at a two-day meeting in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pompeo, Mattis, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Australian Defense Minister Marise Payne were scheduled to hold a news conference on Tuesday at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University — the second day of the gathering.

The annual meeting between the two countries always includes discussions about security.

The U.S. Department of State said this year's talks would focus on threats in the Indo-Pacific region and cooperation to defeat Islamic State militants. China and North Korea were also on the table.

The U.S. and China are locked in a trade dispute playing out in a tariff tit-for-tat between the two nations. The U.S., meanwhile, is pushing North Korea to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs entirely.

Pompeo was recently in North Korea to continue talks. President Donald Trump met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at a historic summit in Singapore on June 12, but the North has yet to take concrete steps toward denuclearizing, nor has it returned the remains of some U.S. service members, as was promised as part of the two-page agreement signed in Singapore.

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9 Australians Awarded Bravery Medals For Thai Cave Rescue (McGuirk, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Rod McGuirk

A doctor awarded an Australian bravery medal for his pivotal work in the Thai cave rescue said he was most frightened by not knowing how much sedation to give to the weakened children.

Nine Australians involved in rescuing 12 boys and their 25 -year-old soccer coach were presented with medals at a ceremony Tuesday in the capital Canberra for putting their lives in danger during the treacherous ordeal.

Anesthetist Richard Harris and his dive buddy Craig Challen, a retired veterinarian, were awarded the Star of Courage, the second-highest civilian bravery decoration in the Australian honors system after the Cross of Valor. Six police and a navy diver received the lesser Bravery Medal.

Harris sedated the 13 before they began their journey out, fearing panic in the dark and confined cave system was a major threat to their survival.

Harris said on Tuesday he consulted with a range of specialist doctors in Thailand and Australia before deciding how much sedative to use.

"It was an estimate to start with and the first child was an experiment in a way and so it was a good guess with a lot advice from a lot of other specialists," Harris told reporters after the ceremony at Government House.

"I've never done it in the back of a cave on malnourished, skinny, dehydrated Thai kids before so that for me was the most frightening part of the week," Harris added.

Asked what would have been the consequences if he had got the sedation wrong, Harris told The AP: "A poorer outcome than we got."

Rescuers feared a panicked boy could lose his diving mask and drown. Panic could also endanger the rescuers.

Challen said the first boy emerging from the cave alive gave him hope.

"The first boy came through and he was still alive and still breathing — that was one of the best moments," Challen told reporters. Harris and Challen, both 53-year-old experienced cave divers, had displayed conspicuous bravery in the successful cave rescue mission, their citations said.

The boys and their coach entered the cave on June 23 for a quick exploration, but flooding quickly blocked the exit and they had to retreat deeper inside the cave. Heavy rains raised water levels further and thwarted the initial searches before two British divers on July 2 found the group huddled on a dry patch of ground, safe but hungry.

Harris and Challen arrived at the cave on July 6 and reached the team the next day.

"Dr. Harris conducted initial medical assessments and was able to provide information to the awaiting authorities regarding the safest extraction methods," the citations said.

"The rescue mission was hazardous, with poor or zero visibility, debris and constrictive passageways, variable air quality, and made more difficult with further rainfalls predicted," they added.

Harris sedated the boys and coach before they were taken out by divers over three days, concluding July 10.

Challen helped remove the team's masks and wetsuits as the boys and coach were stretchered through dry places then he prepared them for their next dive through flooded sections of the cave, his citation said.

The other seven Australian divers displayed considerable bravery throughout the cave system helping move the team to the entrance, their citations said.

"The threat of sudden flooding, movement of debris and deterioration of air quality posed continuous, potentially fatal hazards to all personnel in the cave system," their citations said.

The dangers were brought home by one death during the long rescue operation, former Thai navy SEAL Saman Gunan, who died while replenishing supplies inside the cave.

The 12 boys and coach recovered for a week in a hospital.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had nominated the nine for awards, which were fast-tracked because of public calls for official recognition of their role.

"You made us so proud. Selfless and courageous, superbly professional, competent. We could not have better ambassadors showing the best of our Australian values than you," Turnbull told the award ceremony.

"It's impossible to overstate how dangerous was your task," he added.

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Thailand's Soccer Boys Prepare To Ordain As Buddhist Novices (Vejpongsa, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Tassanee Vejpongsa

The young soccer teammates and their coach who were rescued after being trapped in a cave in northern Thailand took part in a Buddhist ceremony Tuesday as they prepared to be ordained to become Buddhist novices and monks.

Eleven of the boys and their coach prayed to ancient relics and offered drinks and desserts placed in gilded bowls to spirits in a ceremony at a Buddhist temple.

The boys, whose ages range from 11 to 16, will ordain to become Buddhist novices in a ceremony on Wednesday, while the 25-year-old coach will ordain as a monk, said Parchon Pratsakul, the governor of Chiang Rai province. The 12th team member who was trapped in the cave won't take part because he isn't Buddhist.

Wednesday's ordainment ceremony will take place at another temple on a Chiang Rai mountaintop before the group returns to reside for more than a week at the Wat Pha That Doi Wao temple near Thailand's northern border with Myanmar. That temple is close to the group's homes, making it easier for friends and relatives to visit.

"This temple will be where they will reside after the ordination and I hope they will find peace, strength and wisdom from practicing Buddha's teaching," said the temple's acting abbot, Phra Khru Prayutjetiyuanukarn.

Buddhist males in predominantly Buddhist Thailand are traditionally expected to ordain and enter the monkhood, often as novices, at some point in their lives to show gratitude, often toward their parents for raising them. It's believed that once a person is ordained they gain merit that is also extended to the parents.

"Ordinations are supposed to give us peace of mind," said Sangiemjit Wongsukchan, mother of Ekarat Wongsukchan, 14, one of the boys who was trapped in the cave. "We can only do this for nine days because then he will have to go back to study and prepare for exams. Back to his normal life."

Praphun Khomjoi, chief of Chiang Rai's Buddhism office, said the 12 to be ordained will dedicate their merit-generating act of entering the monkhood to a volunteer diver and former Thai navy SEAL, Samarn Gunan, who died while diving during a mission to supply the cave with oxygen tanks essential to helping the boys escape.

The 12 boys and their coach were released from a hospital last Wednesday, more than a week after they were rescued from the flooded cave. They became trapped on June 23 and were finally found by two British divers on July 2. They were brought out of the cave in a daring rescue mission that ended on July 10.

Chiang Rai Gov. Parchon said Sunday that the boys' mental and physical conditions were steadily improving with only minor health complications. He said that one boy, who initially reported that he had rashes, did not appear to have any new ones, and another boy was being treated for a tooth cavity.

Dozens of locals joined in Tuesday morning's temple ceremonies to show support for the group, whose rescue captivated Thais as well as people around the world.

"I was so happy to see them alive and I thought it would be good to attend the ceremony to show them our support," said Apinya Winthachai, a local Buddhist nun.

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SOUTH & CENTRAL ASIA

Army Commandos Kill Senior Taliban Leaders In Afghanistan (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

An Afghan official says 12 insurgents including a Taliban shadow governor and district chief have been killed in a military operation by Afghan commando units in northeastern Kapisa province.

Sharin Aqa Faqiri, spokesman for the army in northeastern Afghanistan, says Tuesday that Mullah Nasim Mushfaq, Taliban shadow governor for Kapisa, and Qari Esanullah, the shadow district chief for Tagab, were among those killed in the operation late Sunday night.

Faqiri said the senior Taliban leaders were in a meeting when they came under attack by ground forces supported by aircraft Tagab district.

Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, confirmed the attack in a statement, saying a number of Taliban including the shadow governor and shadow district chief were killed in the attack.

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UN Urges Accelerated Preparations For Afghan Elections (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The U.N. Security Council is urging Afghan authorities to accelerate preparations for elections in October and stressing the importance of "a secure environment" for credible voting to take place.

The U.S. and NATO forces formally concluded their combat mission at the end of 2014 and a resurgent Taliban and an Islamic State affiliate have launched major attacks since then.

The council said in a statement Monday approved by all 15 council members that quick action is needed on outstanding issues

including approval of candidates to fill “critical vacancies” on the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission.

It said a central database of the more than 8.9 million registered voters must be established “that identifies irregularities,” and a final list of candidates must be published.

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AFP Journalists, Employees Killed On Duty, In Attacks (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

AFP Kabul driver Mohammad Akhtar, killed at the weekend, is the latest of the agency's staffers to die on the job or in attacks since it was founded in 1944.

Akhtar was among 23 people killed in a suicide bombing Sunday, struck as he was on his way to work. At least 107 people were injured in the attack claimed by the Islamic State group.

The Kabul bureau also lost, just weeks earlier, its chief photographer Shah Marai, killed in an attack in Kabul on April 30 that claimed the lives of nine journalists and 16 other people.

Here are the Agence France-Presse journalists, whether full time or freelance, and other staff who have died while on mission or in attacks.

- July 2018 – AFGHANISTAN: Mohammad Akhtar, driver.
- April 2018 – AFGHANISTAN: Shah Marai, chief photographer.
- April 2018 – YEMEN: Abdullah al-Qadry, a photographer and videographer.
- May 2017 – MEXICO: Javier Valdez, stringer.
- August 2014 – SYRIA: James Foley, independent journalist.
- March 2014 – AFGHANISTAN: Sardar Ahmad, journalist.
- April 2006 – IRAQ: Salah Jalil Al Gharraoui, administrative officer.
- May 2005 – IRAQ: Raed Jaffat, correspondent.
- May 2005 – ITALY: Paolo Cocco, photographer.
- December 2004 – GAMBIA: Deyda Hydara, correspondent.
- June 2003 – DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: Acquitte Kisembo, correspondent.
- July 2003 – RUSSIA/INGUSHETIA: Ali Astamirov, correspondent.
- September 1995 – KASHMIR: Mushtaq Ali, photographer.
- October 1995 – TUNISIA: Georges Bendrihem, photographer.
- April 1994 – IRAQI KURDISTAN: Lissy Schmidt, correspondent.
- December 1989 – EL SALVADOR: Eloy Guevara, photographer.
- June 1975 – FRANCE: Bernard Cabanes, journalist.
- March 1975 – VIETNAM: Paul Leandri, journalist.
- April 1974 – LAOS/CAMBODIA: Marc Filioux, correspondent.
- December 1969 – VIETNAM: Alain Saint-Paul, journalist.
- September 1962 – UNITED STATES: Paul Guihard, journalist.
- February 1951 – KOREA: Jean-Marie de Premonville, journalist.
- July 1950 – JAPAN: Maximilien Philonenko, journalist.

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Military Fans Out Across Pakistan Ahead Of Elections (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

Pakistan's military fanned out across the country ahead of Wednesday's election, deploying hundreds of thousands of troops to oversee polling stations in a short but acrimonious contest that analysts say is still "up for grabs".

Armed soldiers watched closely as election officials in the capital Islamabad Tuesday distributed ballot boxes and voting materials for polling stations across the city.

The armed forces have stationed over 370,000 personnel nationwide to ensure the vote goes smoothly – the largest such deployment in Pakistan's history on an election day.

"Deployment of troops completed across the country," the military said in a statement late on Monday, saying the troops would work with local law enforcement to ensure "a safe and secure environment" for voting.

The mammoth deployment coupled with a recent decision by election authorities to grant military officers broad powers inside polling booths has stirred fears of possible manipulation ahead of the contest.

The military's manoeuvring was just the latest source of controversy in a short but bitter campaign season that has seen accusations of "pre-poll rigging", the expansion of hardline religious parties and a string of bloody militant attacks that have killed more than 175 people, including three candidates.

Despite the controversies and bloodshed, political parties continued to criss-cross the country in the final days before the polls, holding dozens of rallies in key battleground areas.

The contest has largely been distilled to a two-party fight between jailed former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's incumbent Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz party, and cricketing legend Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

"Our predictions are very murky right now," Bilal Gilani, executive director of Gallup Pakistan, told AFP, adding that a huge chunk of voters remain undecided. "It's still up for grabs."

Political parties held their final rallies Monday night – before campaigning was suspended – in a last-ditch attempt to energise voters.

"I am giving this task to all of you to wake up early on the 25th and cast your vote," Khan told thousands of party faithful in the eastern city of Lahore.

In southern Punjab, PML-N leader and brother of the former premier Shahbaz Sharif said victory was "certain".

"Despite all the odds PML-N is winning the July 25 polls," he was quoted as saying by Pakistani media.

The PML-N has complained it is being targeted by the powerful military, accusing it of manipulating candidates and the media ahead of the vote in a bid to push out the party and install a pliant government, with Khan seen as the likely beneficiary.

Activists and think tanks have also widely decried a "silent coup" by the generals.

At a PML-N rally in the military garrison city of Rawalpindi, anger simmered over what participants said was engineering by "the establishment" – referring to the military – with some vowing to take to the streets after the polls if directed by their leaders.

"After the election, we will fight," said PML-N supporter Aftab Anjum.

"Yes, we are all ready."

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Unease As Imran Khan Invokes Blasphemy In Pakistan Election (Abbas, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Gohar Abbas

Pakistan's politicians, including PM hopeful Imran Khan, are mainstreaming extremism by invoking hardline issues like blasphemy to get votes, analysts say, warning the tactic could deepen sectarian fractures and potentially spill into violence.

The warnings come as Pakistan confronts anger over a new wave of militant attacks which have killed 175 people at campaign events ahead of nationwide polls on July 25.

The country's long-persecuted religious minorities are on their guard as a result.

"Previously it was only a bunch of extremists spreading hatred against Ahmadis," said Amir Mehmood, a member of a community which has long been targeted by extremists in Pakistan, particularly over blasphemy.

"Now mainstream parties like the PTI (Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) are doing it."

Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, but their beliefs are seen as blasphemous in most mainstream Islamic schools of thought. They are designated non-Muslims in Pakistan's constitution.

Khan, the cricketer-turned-politician who is the main challenger in the election, has caused concern in recent weeks with his full-throated defence of Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws, which carry a maximum penalty of death.

It is a hugely inflammatory charge in Pakistan. The state has never executed a blasphemy convict, but mere accusations of insulting Islam have sparked mob lynchings and murders.

International rights groups have long criticised the colonial-era legislation as a tool of oppression and abuse, particularly against minorities. In recent years, it has also been weaponised to smear dissenters and even politicians.

The topic is so incendiary that mere calls to reform the law have provoked violence, most notably the assassination of Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Pakistan's most populous province, by his own bodyguard in 2011.

The assassin, Mumtaz Qadri, was angered by Taseer's reformist stance on blasphemy. Feted as a hero by hardliners, he was executed by the incumbent Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government in 2016, provoking Islamist fury.

– 'There is a shift' –

Now Qadri's image is being used on election banners, and some of Khan's candidates are asking Pakistanis if they plan to vote for "the party who executed him", placing themselves firmly on the side of Islamists.

At one rally in Islamabad this month, Khan told clerics in televised comments that the PTI "fully" supports the blasphemy law "and will defend it".

"No Muslim can call himself a Muslim unless he believes that the Prophet Mohammed is the last prophet," he said – a statement that raised alarm among Ahmadis, who are persecuted for their belief in a prophet after Mohammed.

Analyst Amir Rana says "there is a shift" in this election: "The mainstream political parties are also exploiting the religious narrative."

He predicts this change would deepen sectarian divides, empower radical groups, and could provoke violence.

Khan may simply be trying to target the PML-N with his comments on blasphemy, says minority activist Kapil Dev.

But when the potential next prime minister of the country shares an inflammatory stance with extremists, "people take it seriously", Dev warned.

Jibran Nasir, a prominent human rights activist running as an independent candidate in the southern city of Karachi, is already facing threats over the issue.

Islamist hardliners stormed his election events and warned him not to campaign in the area over his refusal to denounce Ahmadis.

In a video posted online, one cleric in Nasir's constituency is seen referencing the assassin Qadri in a threatening speech.

– 'Heretics' –

Organisations like Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), which blockaded the capital Islamabad for weeks last year over blasphemy, are widely contesting the polls.

The party's chief, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, reportedly told journalists in Karachi that if he took power in the nuclear-armed country he would "wipe Holland off the face of the earth" over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

Other radical groups contesting the vote include Sunni sectarian extremists Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), and the Milli Muslim League, linked to Hafiz Saeed, the man accused of masterminding the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

"If we get power in the evening and if a single Shia is alive by the morning in Pakistan then change my name," ASWJ leader Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi told an election rally.

Both groups have been banned from the election but their candidates are contesting under the banner of other, lesser-known parties.

The analyst Rana suggested PTI and Khan may also be trying to weaken the appeal of radical religious groups by co-opting their rhetoric.

But if he really is seeking to cut support for these parties, it will only increase the appeal of extremism, warns the Ahmadi activist Mehmoood.

In his town of Rabwah in central Pakistan, a hub of the Ahmadi community, residents say not one politician has visited its 40,000 registered voters this campaign season.

"Nobody dares to come here," Mehmoood says. "They will be considered heretics."

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Roiled By Military Intervention, Karachi Voters Push For Change (Abi-Habib, Ur-Rehman, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Maria Abi-Habib And Zia Ur-Rehman

Karachi's residents will go to the polls angry this week.

The city, Pakistan's economic powerhouse, is in shambles, roads crumbling, slums expanding, deprived of basic government services although it provides the country with about 40 percent of its revenue. And its political landscape has been profoundly jumbled.

Across the country, Pakistani voters will be making choices on Wednesday that have been heavily winnowed by the military establishment, which through intimidation and a sympathetic judiciary has repressed its unfavored candidates — and even entire political movements — in recent months.

Nowhere have the results of the military's manipulation of politics been more evident than in Karachi, both for worse and for better.

For the first time in three decades, Karachi residents will vote without much of the threat of street violence and poll manipulation that kept the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, or M.Q.M., as the city's dominant force for so long.

Pakistan's military launched an operation in 2013 to break the M.Q.M.'s hold on power in Karachi and combat the gangs that had cropped up to challenge it — bulldozing the party's offices, arresting its leaders — that many credit as restoring some stability. Before then, waking up to dozens of dead bodies dumped on the streets by those gang wars was not an unusual morning.

But the changes to the city did not stop there. A census last year undercounted the city's population, according to politicians, who say Karachi is home to about five million more people than the 15 million reported. Karachi politicians from several parties say the national election commission used those census results to gerrymander the constituencies for this election in an effort to ensure that the city would never again be under the stranglehold of a single party.

These moves, politicians say, were pursued by the military with the support of the country's courts. Soldiers even went door to door with census workers to count each household, illustrating the military's unusual interest in the count.

One result of Karachi's new relative stability has been an upwelling of long-repressed dissent and complaints about the state of the city.

"There's a lot of anger among voters asking what has been done for them," said Omar Shahid Hamid, a senior police officer in Karachi. "Candidates can't even campaign without being mobbed by angry residents. But they must now face this anger without the fist of street violence."

A microcosm of Pakistan, Karachi represents the country's diverse ethnic and sectarian makeup, the grievances of each group and the harassment or perversion of the institutions meant to protect them: the news media, security services and the courts.

As the military cracked down on the M.Q.M., the Taliban and the city's other militant factions in recent years, it was accused of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Law enforcement officials said Pakistan's weak judicial system had left them little choice but to act on their own.

But as rogue militancy waned and police and military abuses continued, Karachi's residents began to question if they were merely trading one despotic regime for another.

When Naqeebulah Mehsud, an ethnic Pashtun shopkeeper and aspiring model with a large social media following, was killed by the police in January, officials said he had militant ties. His family and supporters disputed that claim, as did an internal police inquiry.

Mr. Mehsud's killing helped set off a Pashtun civil rights movement that spread across Pakistan. The movement — known by the initials P.T.M., from words that translate as Pashtun Protection Movement — has openly defied the military in ways the country has seldom seen.

Its leaders say innocent Pashtuns have been killed or abducted by security forces searching for militants, and that the judicial system has failed to stop them.

"When those people who are supposed to maintain law and order and ensure people's safety instead pursue unlawful activities, it only increases the anarchy. It gives a signal to society that everything is broken," said Asad Iqbal Butt, vice chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent group. "Where does this country stand? Where should citizens go for justice or protection?"

Missing persons cases in particular have been a central election topic, despite the military's efforts to keep them out of the national discourse. Still, national parties fearful of the military's power have been reluctant to publicize the issue.

Mr. Butt's organization estimates there are some 4,000 missing people across Pakistan.

That number includes people from smaller religious and ethnic minorities, like the Shia, Baloch and Sindhi, which have been buoyed by the Pashtun movement.

Pashtuns are the largest minority in Pakistan, making up about 15 percent of the country's 200 million people and filling the ranks of the military and government, which activists say gives them some protection. Although the census did not provide an ethnic breakdown, by some estimates, about four million Pashtuns live in Karachi.

The unity among Pakistan's array of minorities over a single issue — their missing — has undermined the military's strategy of stoking tensions among them, candidates say.

"What the P.T.M. has done is make this a mainstream issue, and that's because the Pashtuns have the numbers," said Mohammed Jibran Nasir, 31, who is running as an independent for a seat in Karachi.

Mr. Nasir is not Pashtun but has campaigned against police brutality.

"The P.T.M.'s mainstreaming this issue has taken away the narrative of the state," he said, referring to the official version of events in cases like Mr. Mehsud's.

That newfound boldness and unity was on display in Karachi late last month during a visit by Pakistan's chief justice, Mian Saqib Nisar. He was confronted by dozens of people demanding to know whether loved ones were alive or dead, accusing security forces of grabbing them months or years ago.

The families tussled with the police at Karachi's Supreme Court, leaving Justice Nisar visibly stunned, unaccustomed to civilians openly challenging Pakistan's security forces.

A Shia woman slipped through the security cordon, ran up to the chief justice and slammed her fists on his dais, demanding to know the fate of her brother, missing since November 2016. The justice said coolly that if she hadn't been a woman, he would have had her locked up.

Sensing how momentous the Pashtun movement could become, Pakistan's media outlets began reporting on it earlier this year, only to be threatened by the military themselves.

Journalists from a number of newspapers and television stations say they have been called by security forces and told not to report on the movement, in an effort to stop it from spreading. Most complied.

Two influential news outlets that did not — the Karachi newspaper Dawn and the television channel Geo News — were censored by the military and lost advertisers who cited military pressure.

Zaffar Abbas, the editor of Dawn, said the last time the intimidation against his newspaper was this severe was in 1991, when he was a reporter covering fissures within the M.Q.M. party. Members of the group surrounded Dawn's headquarters and burned the newspapers stacked inside delivery vans, as the government stood by and did nothing.

"The violence that has consumed Karachi is the result of how the city has been ignored nationally," Mr. Abbas said, before contemplating the recent attempts to suppress grievances against security forces. "And it will return."

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Urban Youth Rise Up Against Feudal Fiefdoms In Pakistan Election (Mangi, Kay, Dilawar, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Faseeh Mangi, Chris Kay And Ismail Dilawar

Near the rural town of Badin in southern Pakistan, about a four-hour drive from the financial capital of Karachi, dozens of men wait through the night for a chance to meet with Zulfiqar Mirza.

The landowner's family holds sway in a part of Sindh province the size of the U.S. state of Delaware, and villagers go to Mirza for everything from employment to education to settling disputes. One of them, 69-year-old Khalid Hussain, said this month he needed help after being abandoned by his children.

The Mirzas "help people out," Hussain said while waiting at the family's 700-acre estate. "I just want a job to feed my stomach."

Local power brokers like the Mirzas may end up as kingmakers in the nuclear-armed nation after a July 25 election, with polls showing that no single party is likely to win a majority in Pakistan's parliament. For national politicians, courting large rural landholders known as "electables" is a Catch 22: Their support is essential to win elections in Pakistan, but many also tend to oppose measures like modernizing the country's labor and tax laws that would boost economic growth in the cash-strapped nation.

Known as *biradiri*, the rural patronage system helps explain why Pakistan scores the lowest in Asia on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index after Afghanistan, North Korea and Cambodia. While urbanization and redistricting has steadily eroded the power of rural politicians, in many areas they still can provide favors, administer justice and even pressure villagers into voting for a certain candidate.

Feudalism is still "very strong" in the countryside, said Mustafa Kamal, the former mayor of Karachi, who heads the urban-focused Pak Sarzameen Party. "The common man does not have that much strength to stand up to the feudal lord – he will just squeeze him like anything."

That power structure has come under attack in the election campaign. Imran Khan, a former cricket star who has seen his popularity surge, has sought to rally younger, urban voters by denouncing feudalistic and dynastic parties that still dominate Pakistan's political scene. Since the 1970s, the country has alternately been ruled by the military, the Pakistan Peoples Party and the Pakistan Muslim League led by Nawaz Sharif, a three-time prime minister serving a jail sentence for corruption.

Protests against landlords and their families have also taken place in cities. During a rally this month in Karachi, the convoy of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari – head of the Pakistan Peoples Party and son of assassinated Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto – was pelted with stones.

"People are tired of the old guard," said Ayesha Siddiqi, a research associate at the SOAS South Asia Institute in London. Voters aged 18 to 35 comprise 44 percent of the electorate, she said, and many will likely vote for Khan.

Khan, whose anti-corruption campaign helped spur Sharif's arrest, has pledged to widen Pakistan's low tax base and strengthen government institutions. Yet even while railing against feudalism Khan has found it necessary to court key rural politicians, particularly in the breadbasket province of Punjab, which provides more than half the nation's federal seats.

The Mirza family in Badin is running with the Grand Democratic Alliance, a minority party that hasn't said who it will back for prime minister after the election. Hasnain Mirza, the 34-year-old son of Zulfiqar, acknowledged his family's political lineage but also denied it was feudal.

"The basis of support is from all the services rendered to them," Mirza said. "Where we fail to render services, people are free to walk with their backs against us. It's everybody's free will who they support and how long they deal with it."

Mirza also said the electorate has become more enlightened, and cracks were emerging in the *biradiri* system. "Those politicians who rely on patronage are fighting against time," he said.

Eliminating the system of political patronage in rural Pakistan "is not a one-day affair," said Agha Siraj Durrani, a dynastic politician with the Pakistan Peoples Party, which has controlled Sindh's government since 2008. Durrani was the most recent speaker of the province's parliament, a role previously occupied by his father and uncle.

Even though his family wealth has been diluted over generations, Durrani said his surname continues to hold sway under the *biradiri* system in his constituency after 200 years: "You look after them and they stand by you."

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What Is At Stake In Pakistan's Election? (Masood, Goldman, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

CWASHAR0000854

New York Times

By Salman Masood And Russell Goldman

Pakistanis will go to the polls on Wednesday to elect a prime minister, transferring power from one civilian government to another for only the second time in the nation's 70-year history.

The election comes at a critical moment for a country of 200 million people and for a region stressed by war. Pakistan is a nuclear state, an antipathetic but important American ally, and one of the largest Muslim-majority countries in the world.

This year's election could have been an occasion for Pakistanis to celebrate their democracy. Instead, the campaign has been marred by suppression of the news media, accusations of manipulation by the military, a rise in Islamist extremist candidates and a series of attacks on candidates and campaign rallies, including one that killed 151 people.

Pakistan's politics have always been messy: The country has routinely toggled between elected governments and military dictatorships, and a prime minister has never completed his or her entire five-year term. But this year's campaign has been particularly fraught, given the military's efforts to push the former governing party out of the running.

Despite that manipulation, the election on Wednesday will serve as a kind of referendum on some of the most crucial issues facing the country. Should Pakistan orient its economy toward the West or toward China? Is its democracy robust enough to include extremist candidates who support militancy, or should they be limited? Can the military and the courts be trusted as impartial and objective institutions?

Wedged between Afghanistan, where an American-led war has stretched on for 17 years, and its historic rival India, Pakistan is always at risk of a conflagration. It has served both as a crucial base for American forces fighting in Afghanistan and as a powerful obstacle to those same troops, secretly offering aid and safe harbor to militant groups, including the Taliban and Al Qaeda. An Economic Crisis

But Pakistan's problems are not just about regional security — they are also about its ability to provide opportunity for its own people, including a growing class of young and educated Pakistanis. Despite its size and potential, the country's economy has lagged, and it faces persistent problems with corruption and environmental stress.

As tensions with the United States and other Western countries have intensified — particularly over accusations that Pakistan is not doing enough to curb the Afghan Taliban and other militant groups — Pakistan has increasingly turned to China for aid and support. But that pivot has come with its own problems, including concern over the quickly increasing amount of debt Pakistan is racking up with China. Who Is Running?

There are 122 parties fielding candidates in the election. They all promise jobs, social welfare and housing plans. But the overarching theme of the election has become the confrontation between the military and the governing party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, or P.M.L.-N. The party accuses the military of intimidating some of its leading figures into defecting to other blocs, and of unfairly supporting a rival candidate, Imran Khan. Imran Khan

Mr. Khan, 65, is a former international cricket star who has promised an alternative to the corruption and the entrenched political dynasties voters associate with the other leading parties. His rivals attribute his surge in the polls to a back-room deal struck with the military, which they claim has worked to undermine the election. Mr. Khan has denied that accusation, chalking up the accusations of meddling to sour grapes.

Mr. Khan, whose success on the cricket pitch made him a household name, has held a seat in the National Assembly for five years but has never run a government. A large number of independent candidates are expected to join his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or P.T.I., if it wins. Shehbaz Sharif

Nawaz Sharif, a three-time prime minister, was ousted last year by the country's Supreme Court. He was convicted of corruption and is now in prison after returning from London this month to be arrested. Mr. Sharif says those court decisions were made under pressure from the military, which opposed his attempts as prime minister to reassert control over the country's defense and foreign policy.

But his family remains politically powerful. His younger brother, Shehbaz Sharif, 66, is the current president of the P.M.L.-N. and hopes to lead the country. Until recently, he was the chief minister of Punjab, the most populous and prosperous of the country's four provinces and the party's biggest source of support. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, 29, is the scion of one of Pakistan's most illustrious and star-crossed dynasties. He is the son and grandson of two former prime ministers, Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who was executed. His father, former President Asif Ali Zardari, is considered to wield the real power in the left-leaning Pakistan Peoples Party.

CWASHAR0000855

The younger Mr. Zardari is not expected to win, but he could potentially play kingmaker if neither Mr. Khan nor Mr. Sharif receives enough votes to form a government. Will Extremists Affect the Outcome?

Pakistan was recently added to the Financial Action Task Force's "gray list" of state sponsors of terrorism, increasing pressure on the country to crack down on extremist groups. At nearly the same time, however, the country's electoral commission was paving the way for more candidates with extremist ties to run for office.

Among the parties seeking seats on Wednesday are Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek, the reconstituted version of a party that officials had previously banned, and Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan, which backs the country's contentious blasphemy laws.

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Indian Mob Lynches Woman On Rumors Of Child Kidnapping (Hussain, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Ajaz Hussain

A woman was lynched in central India on rumors that she was part of a gang that kidnapped children, police said Monday, days after the highest court called for immediate steps to control deadly mob violence across the country.

The Indian government announced Monday that it is setting up two committees to recommend appropriate ways to deal with the growing mob violence.

At least 14 people were arrested in Madhya Pradesh state's Singrauli district following the killing of the woman, who was about 25, senior police officer Riyaz Iqbal said.

Iqbal said residents informed police on Saturday that a woman's body was lying in a forested area. Police recovered the body, which bore multiple injury marks, he said. An initial investigation showed that she had been taken Friday night by a mob which dragged her to a village community center while punching and kicking her and hitting her with sticks.

Iqbal said the woman was seen roaming around neighboring villages a few days earlier amid wild rumors that members of child kidnapping gangs were active in the area.

The officer said the woman had not yet been identified. "She was not able to properly communicate with the mob and in all probability appears to have been mentally unsound," he said.

India has a long history of mob violence, but in recent years, the internet and smartphones have aided the circulation of deadly rumors even to remote places.

At least 25 people have been lynched and dozens wounded in mob attacks in the last three months over rumors that they were part of child kidnapping gangs. The victims were outsiders, mostly targeted because they looked different or didn't speak the local language.

Although Indian authorities have stated that there is no truth to the child-lifting rumors and the victims were innocent, the brutal attacks, often captured on cellphones and shared on social media, have spread across the country.

In addition, at least 20 people have been lynched and dozens wounded by Hindu extremists who call themselves cow protectors and are linked to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bhartiya Janta Party since the Hindu nationalist party won national elections in 2014.

Most of the attacks by the so-called cow vigilantes have targeted Muslims, who make up 14 percent of India's 1.3 billion people. Hindus make up about 80 percent of the population. Cows are considered sacred by many Hindus, and slaughtering cows or eating beef is illegal or restricted across much of the country.

The victims were accused of either smuggling cows for slaughter or eating beef. Lower-caste Hindus who carry out undesirable tasks such as skinning dead cattle have also faced mob violence.

On Friday, a Muslim man was lynched in western India on charges of smuggling two cows.

Indian opposition leaders expressed outrage Monday as broadcasters reported that police had delayed taking the injured victim to a hospital, leading to his death.

"This is Modi's brutal 'New India' where humanity is replaced with hatred and people are crushed and left to die," opposition Congress party president Rahul Gandhi tweeted Monday, saying police took three hours to take the injured man to a hospital just 6 kilometers (about 4 miles) away.

Rights groups and Muslims say government officials, including Modi, have been slow to condemn the attacks and that police action against perpetrators has been inadequate.

Last Tuesday, India's highest court asked the federal government to consider enacting a law to deal with mob violence. The Supreme Court directed authorities to take action against police or officials who fail to comply with the court's directive on pursuing such cases in a country where there is widespread distrust of the police and the courts, both of which are burdened by corruption and poor training.

The committees set up on Monday will review existing laws dealing with mob violence and see if new provisions are needed in accordance with the Supreme Court's recommendations, media reports said.

The country's top security official, Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba, will head one panel consisting of four government officials and will submit its recommendations to the second committee, made up of four Cabinet ministers, within four weeks, the reports said. The ministerial committee, headed by Home Minister Rajnath Singh, will report its final recommendations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Indian government recently accused the Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp of fueling the deadly rumors. The service responded last Thursday by announcing restrictions on the number of groups to which a message can be forwarded. In India, the limit on forwarding is five chats at once, while for WhatsApp users outside India, the limit on forwarding will be 20.

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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Rubio Warns Nicaragua Has 'Declared War' On The Catholic Church (Boylan, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dan Boylan

Sen. Marco Rubio on Monday lashed out at Nicaragua's government and President Daniel Ortega for increasing attacks on the Catholic Church amid the Central American country's ongoing protests and violence.

"The Ortega/Murillo regime in #Nicaragua has in essence declared war on the church & its clergy," the Florida Republican tweeted on Monday.

"Lost in all the coverage of other issues is this rapidly escalating crisis in our hemisphere which has direct implications on our national security & interests," he added.

The Ortega/Murillo regime in #Nicaragua has in essence declared war on the church & its clergy. Lost in all the coverage of other issues is this rapidly escalating crisis in our hemisphere which has direct implications on our national security & interests
<https://t.co/1WxZRJ9AZS> — Marco Rubio (@marcorubio) July 23, 2018

Demonstrations that began in April as student-led rallies have morphed into a national rebellion against Mr. Ortega, who led the anti-U.S. Sandinista insurgency in the 1980s and has been president since 2007. The crackdown on the protests, which began over proposed cuts in social welfare programs, have left almost 300 people dead and more than 2,000 wounded — with the U.N. last week warning of human rights violations by Mr. Ortega's paramilitary forces.

In the early weeks of the demonstrations, Mr. Ortega supported the Catholic Church mediating dialogue with opposition groups.

But as the uprising has evolved, violence against Church leadership and worshipers has multiplied, with at least seven churches having reported being vandalized. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes of Managua was mobbed earlier this month by hooded Ortega supporters.

In recent weeks the Church, led by Pope Francis, has increased its support of the protesters, including hosting Mr. Brenes at the Vatican.

Mr. Ortega is now lashing out at the clergy, issuing a direct attack during a July 19 Revolution Day speech.

"I thought they were mediators, but no, they are beholden to the coup plotters," said Mr. Ortega, referencing his argument that the protests have been manufactured by outsiders in a bid to topple his rule.

On Sunday, Mr. Rubio warned that “the possibility of a civil war in Nicaragua is real”, telling CNN that the escalating situation could “trigger a migratory crisis”.

“It would undermine our anti-drug efforts in the region,” he added. “There is a direct national security interest for the United States in seeing democracy and stability in Nicaragua.”

In a sign of the Trump administration tightening focus on the issue, earlier this month Treasury Department officials imposed sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act on three of Mr. Ortega’s closest associates, including the head of the national police, for alleged corruption and human rights violations relations.

On Sunday Mr. Rubio said more penalties against Nicaraguan entities and individuals were in the works.

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Nicaragua’s Ortega Denies Responsibility For Deaths (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega says he won’t move up elections despite street protests that have seen more than 300 deaths the past three months, but is open to continuing a dialogue mediated by the Roman Catholic Church.

In a recorded interview with Fox News, Ortega denies he controls paramilitary groups blamed for most of the killing. He says they are supported by his political opponents and foreign interests.

Ortega also denies responsibility for attacks on the Catholic Church, whose facilities and clergy have faced a number of aggressions in recent weeks.

Last week, in a speech on the anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution, Ortega accused bishops of working with coup plotters, saying that disqualified them as mediators.

Monday saw small marches against and in favor of the government in Managua.

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Nicaragua’s Ortega Refuses Protest Demands To Step Down (Dieste, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Alina Dieste

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega refused Monday to bow to protesters’ demands that he step down, vowing in an interview with US television that he will see through his current term until 2021.

“Our electoral period ends with the elections of 2021, when we will have our next elections,” he told Fox News, adding that he would not countenance opposition demands for early elections.

“To move up the elections would create instability, insecurity and make things worse,” he said.

The 72-year-old leader, who has ruled Nicaragua for a total of 22 years since his Sandinista revolution toppled a US-backed dictator in 1979, declared that the deadly unrest rocking his country since April had ended.

“It’s been a week now that the turmoil has stopped. Matters are becoming more normal in the country,” he said.

He acknowledged that peaceful demonstrations for and against his government were ongoing.

The assertion that Nicaragua’s turmoil was over followed lethal offensives by police and pro-government paramilitaries against protest hubs earlier this month.

Rights groups say nearly 300 people have died in the three months of violence.

– Denials –

Ortega rejected allegations that he controlled the pro-government paramilitaries seen acting in concert with the police.

He instead accused Nicaraguan political groups of heading rival anti-government militias, which he said had sought financing from drug traffickers and the United States. He accused those militias of killing “tens” of police officers in the unrest.

"None of the peaceful demonstrations" have been attacked, he said.

Ortega denied reports by protesters and priests that his forces shot dead two young men holed up in a Managua church that came under sustained fire on July 13 and 14.

"No Nicaraguan has died in any church. Not a single Nicaraguan has died in any church. That's false," Ortega said.

It was also wrong to say priests were being targeted, he said.

"There's not a single priest that we are persecuting," Ortega said, adding that he welcomed efforts by the Catholic Church to mediate talks between his government and opposition groups.

- 'Terrible lies' -

The president also dismissed detractors' claims that he was intent on starting a ruling dynasty by making his wife, Rosario Murillo, his vice president in 2016.

"It never occurred to me to set up a dynasty," he said. "My wife, it's the first time ever she's been vice president."

Ortega said he was speaking to Fox News after years of refusing interviews with foreign media because he wanted the United States to show Nicaragua "respect."

"The history of our relations with the United States has been painful. I don't want to repeat it," he said, criticizing a resolution against Nicaragua that US lawmakers were reported to be preparing.

He also hit out at what he called "a campaign of lies, terrible lies to try to hurt the image of Nicaragua and of its government."

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Hundreds Arrested In Nicaragua Crackdown: Rights Groups (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Nicaraguan authorities have "arbitrarily" arrested hundreds of people in a continuing crackdown on a wave of opposition calling for President Daniel Ortega's ouster, rights groups said Monday.

Many of the detainees were seized on suspicion of taking part in marches against Ortega's government, or providing aid to those agitating against the president, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights said.

The rights group said 292 people had been killed in three months of protests and repression by police and paramilitaries using firearms, raising a previous toll.

The center said it did not have a figure for those detained because the numbers kept shifting between those held for maybe a day or two, some released after a period, and yet others apprehended.

Another group, the Permanent Commission for Human Rights, said it has received reports from relatives of 150 people arrested and another similar number said to be held against their will.

The Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights, meanwhile, said it had received reports of some 700 people detained.

Managua's auxiliary bishop, Silvio Baez, said: "We implore, in the name of God, that this hunting of young people cease... It is not possible to criminalize people for protesting and to treat them like terrorists."

Those detained could risk prosecution under a new law that provides sentences of 15 to 20 years in prison for crimes deemed to amount to "terrorism." Detractors say they fear it will be applied to anti-government protesters.

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Church Becomes Target In Nicaragua Crisis (WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Venezuelan Professor's Worn Out Shoes Bring Wave Of Solidarity (Vasquez, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Alex Vasquez

Jose Ibarra is 41, has a masters degree, is studying for a PhD and works as a university professor, but thanks to Venezuela's economic crisis, he cannot even afford to have his shoes repaired.

Ibarra has become something of a social media hit after a tweet he posted in late June went viral.

His tweet was a photo of a pair of black shoes with broken soles, accompanied by the message: "I'm not ashamed to say this: I go to the UCV with these shoes. My salary as a university professor is not enough to pay for new soles."

The post has been re-tweeted almost 10,000 times, liked 5,400 times, and provoked nearly 1,000 comments plus a whole lot of goodwill.

Ibarra works at the Venezuelan Central University (UCV), the most important in the South American country, and earns 5.9 million bolivars (\$1.70 on the black market) a month.

In a country gripped by hyperinflation – the International Monetary Fund projects will hit a mind-blowing one million percent by the end of this year – that's barely enough to buy a kilo of meat but nowhere near sufficient to pay the 20 million bolivars necessary to get his shoes repaired.

Ibarra's story is a sorry reflection of the catastrophic effects Venezuela's collapsed economy has had on its people.

– 'Explosion of frustration' –

Since he posted his tweet, Ibarra has received donations of shoes, clothes, money and hundreds of messages of support that led him to launch his "Shoes of Dignity" campaign to help other colleagues.

"The tweet was an explosion of frustration. As hardly anyone was following me, I thought no one would see it," Ibarra told AFP.

"But already I've received 12 pairs of shoes – of which I've given away nine – clothes and money.

"I created the movement because I kept receiving donations."

Messages and offers of help have come from far afield: Argentina, Colombia and even Spain.

"We have a shoe shop in Colombia, we repair and make them. How can we send them?" said one Twitter message Ibarra received.

He has kept two pairs of used shoes and one new pair of trainers. He also gained 2,900 followers, more than 10 times the number he had before the tweet.

Ibarra plans to give away some of the money he received to "the professors who need it the most so they can buy food," some of whom have "lost weight because they don't eat well."

Some public university lecturers have intermittently gone on strike over the last three weeks, demanding improved wages.

– 'Impossible to buy shoes' –

Venezuela's economic crisis has had wide-reaching consequences on the country, which is dependent on its vast oil reserves, exports of which provide 96 percent of its hard currency revenue.

Food and medicine shortages have hit the population hard but so, too, has a breakdown in public transport.

Privately owned bus companies cannot afford to run their vehicles because passenger fares cannot cover maintenance costs such as replacing tires.

A shortage of buses led President Nicolas Maduro's government to put on free transport in pick-up trucks known locally as "kennels", but that's been widely criticized due to safety concerns.

It all means that people like Ibarra have been forced to walk where once they would have taken public transport, with his soles obviously bearing the added workload.

"It's impossible to buy shoes. The money I have doesn't allow me to buy personal effects, not even food," said Ibarra.

Lluvia Habibi, in charge of the store in which Ibarra tried to get his shoes repaired, told AFP that prices were high because raw material providers kept pushing up theirs.

Ibarra insists he's lost 15 kilograms (33 pounds) during the crisis and has had to rely on help from family and friends.

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After his infamous tweet, a friend in Mexico sent him money so he could “eat an ice-cream or pizza.”

Other members of his family have also lost weight and don’t have the money to buy new clothes. It means an old sewing machine in his home gets used regularly to take in baggy clothing.

A study by leading universities, UCV included, found that poverty levels had risen to 87 percent of the population in 2017, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the country’s crisis in recent years.

Despite his travails, Ibarra won’t be joining them, though. “Venezuela can be saved,” he insisted.

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Latin America Trade Bloc Summit Opens With Call For Integration (Gonzalez, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Yussel Gonzalez

Latin American trade bloc the Pacific Alliance opened a week-long summit on Monday with a free trade and integration message at a time where protectionism, particularly in the United States, has created growing concerns.

The bloc groups four of the region’s largest economies: Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. The leaders of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay are also attending as guests.

Mexican Economy Minister Ildefonso Guajardo argued as the summit got underway that at a time of soaring global trade tensions, the group needed to remain “unwavering” in its commitment to “openness and integration.”

The Pacific Alliance, launched in 2012, accounts for 38 percent of Latin American GDP and represents the eighth largest economy in the world, with a population of 223 million people.

Collectively, its members are the world’s top exporter of goods ranging from avocados to copper to lead, and are the fifth-largest recipient of foreign direct investment.

That has drawn interest from other countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Singapore, which are all in the process of becoming associate members.

But the summit began without one key figure expected to attend: Mexican President-elect Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, an anti-establishment leftist and free-trade skeptic.

The summit was supposed to be Lopez Obrador’s debut on the international stage ahead of his inauguration on December 1.

But the politician known as “AMLO” pulled out on Friday, saying it would not be proper to attend because electoral authorities have not yet officially declared him president-elect.

Electoral authorities have until September 6 to officially certify the results of the July 1 election.

There is no doubt about Lopez Obrador’s victory. He won with over 53 percent of the vote – more than 30 points clear of his nearest rival, who immediately conceded.

– Region shifts right –

Outgoing Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto had appeared keen to get his successor started off on the right foot with key allies at the summit, despite the fact that Lopez Obrador was a bit of an awkward fit with the pro-trade group.

The invitation was “a good-will gesture by the Pena Nieto government” at a time when “there is a lot of uncertainty about which way Mexican foreign policy is going,” said Manuel Valencia, head of the international business program at Mexico’s Monterrey Institute of Technology.

The other leaders at the summit are Sebastian Pinera of Chile, Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Martin Vizcarra of Peru, as well as guests Michel Temer of Brazil, Mauricio Macri of Argentina and Tabare Vazquez of Uruguay.

With the exception of Vazquez, they are all center-right, market-friendly leaders – the faces of Latin America’s recent shift to the right.

That is a trend that Mexico, long a regional outlier, has bucked by electing Lopez Obrador.

The rest of the region is anxious to see whether the new president of Latin America’s second-largest economy, after Brazil, will stick to his nationalistic guns or govern with the more pragmatic, pro-business tone he showed in the home-stretch of the campaign.

Lopez Obrador has vowed to be fiscally responsible, safeguard free enterprise and work together with the outgoing administration to continue renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada, a deal he had criticized in the past.

Guajardo said on Monday he saw a “window of opportunity” to resume NAFTA negotiations, stalled over US demands.

Jesus Seade, the incoming Mexican negotiator in the complex NAFTA talks, meanwhile told reporters in Puerto Vallarta he was looking to finalize the process.

“All the positions that have been put forward are good ones, those that have been rejected were rejected for a reason – but that is a technical basis. Now we need to find a way to close the deal.”

Lopez Obrador’s recent change in tone has been welcome for Mexico’s Pacific Alliance partners, whose meeting comes at a time of trouble.

US President Donald Trump’s attacks on trading partners from the European Union to North America to China and the retaliatory measures they have launched in return have raised the specter of global trade war.

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IMF Says Venezuela To See 1 Mn Percent Inflation By Year-End (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Amid the financial and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, the country is expected to see hyperinflation reach epic proportions: a million percent a year by the end of 2018, the International Monetary Fund said Monday.

And the nation’s economic collapse will increasingly spill over into neighboring countries, the IMF said in its updated regional outlook for Latin America.

“We are projecting a surge in inflation to 1,000,000 percent by end-2018 to signal that the situation in Venezuela is similar to that in Germany in 1923 or Zimbabwe in the late 2000s,” said Alejandro Werner, head of the IMF’s Western Hemisphere Department.

However, that estimate “has a much higher degree of uncertainty” than most inflation forecasts, he told reporters. Still, whether the rate ends up at 1.2 million or 800,000 percent “the destruction of prices as the mechanism for allocating resources has already happened.”

Venezuela’s economy is expected to contract by 18 percent this year, the third consecutive year of double-digit declines and three points worse than projected in May, amid falling oil production, he said in a statement.

That would mean the country that is seeing waves of citizens fleeing the crisis, while those left suffer increasingly from illness, lack of medicines and weight loss from lack of food, will have contracted by 50 percent in the last few years, one of the few times that has happened in the last half century or more.

– Dragging Latin America down –

He pointed to economic “distortions” in Venezuela’s policies, including printing money to finance the government.

“We expect the government to continue to run wide fiscal deficits financed entirely by an expansion in base money, which will continue to fuel an acceleration of inflation as money demand continues to collapse,” he said in the statement.

OPEC data show Venezuelan oil production crashed to a new 30-year low of 1.5 million barrels a day in June even though the country has the world’s largest reserves of crude.

The South American nation earns 96 percent of its revenue through oil sales but under the government of populist President Nicolas Maduro a lack of foreign exchange has sparked economic paralysis that has left the country suffering serious shortages.

Venezuela’s collapse is dragging down growth in Latin America and the Caribbean to 1.6 percent this year, four-tenths lower than the May forecast.

Excluding Venezuela, however, the region “continues to recover” amid a pickup in consumption, with growth of 2.3 percent this year and 2.8 percent in 2019.

Argentina, which just signed a loan agreement with the IMF, is expected to see its economic growth slow to 0.4 percent this year, rather than the two percent forecast in May.

But the country should see “a gradual recovery in 2019 and 2020 that will be supported by restored confidence under the Fund-supported stabilization program,” Werner said.

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Venezuela's Inflation To Reach 1 Million Percent, IMF Forecasts (Rosati, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Andrew Rosati

Venezuela's inflation will skyrocket to 1 million percent by the end of the year as the government continues to print money to cover a growing budget hole, the International Monetary Fund predicted on Monday.

The crisis is comparable to that of Germany in 1923 or Zimbabwe in the late 2000s, said Alejandro Werner, head of the IMF's Western Hemisphere department. He forecast the economy to shrink 18 percent in 2018 – the third consecutive year of double-digit contractions – as oil production falls significantly.

“The collapse in economic activity, hyperinflation, and increasing deterioration in the provision of public goods as well as shortages of food at subsidized prices have resulted in large migration flows, which will lead to intensifying spillover effects on neighboring countries,” Werner wrote in a blog post.

Venezuela has been suffering a dramatic economic collapse since crude prices nosedived nearly four years ago and authorities have refused to enact economic adjustments. A number of price and exchange controls only added to the distortions.

While hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans flee hunger and surging prices, President Nicolas Maduro has maintained that the crisis is a result of an “economic war” waged by his political opponents at home and abroad. As the economy unraveled, authorities stopped regularly publishing economic indicators. Economists now rely on independent estimates provided by international organizations, banks and even Venezuela's congress to track the country's economic meltdown.

Bloomberg's Cafe Con Leche Index, which tracks the price of a cup of coffee served at a bakery in eastern Caracas, estimates inflation topped 60,000 percent over the past year and is picking up speed now, posting an annualized rate of almost 300,000 percent in the past three months.

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IMF: Venezuela's Inflation On Track To Top 1 Million Percent (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Inflation in Venezuela could top 1 million percent by year's end as the country's historic crisis deepens, the International Monetary Fund said Monday.

Venezuela's economic turmoil compares to Germany's after World War I and Zimbabwe's at the beginning of the last decade, said Alejandro Werner, head of the IMF's Western Hemisphere department.

“The collapse in economic activity, hyperinflation, and increasing deterioration ... will lead to intensifying spillover effects on neighboring countries,” Werner wrote in a blog post.

The once wealthy oil-producing nation of Venezuela is in the grips of a five-year crisis that leaves many of its people struggling to find food and medicine, while driving masses across the border for relief into neighboring Colombia and Brazil.

Shortages in electricity, domestic water and public transportation plague millions of Venezuelans, who also confront high crime, the IMF noted.

If the prediction holds, Venezuela's economy will contract 50 percent over the last five years, Werner said, adding that it would be among the world's deepest economic falls in six decades.

Socialist President Nicolas Maduro often blames Venezuela's poor economy on an economic war that he says is being waged by the United States and Europe.

Maduro won a second six-year term as president despite the deep economic and political problems in a May election that his leading challenger and many nations in the international community don't recognize as legitimate.

The IMF estimates Venezuela's economy could contract 18 percent this year, up from the 15 percent drop it predicted in April. This will be the third consecutive year of double-digit decline, the IMF said.

Werner said the projections are based on calculations prepared by IMF staff, but he warned that they have a degree of uncertainty greater than in other countries.

"An economy throwing you these numbers is very difficult to project," Werner said at a news conference. "Any changes between now and December may include significant changes."

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Venezuela's Fate: Brother, Can You Spare A Million Bolívars? (Casey, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Nicholas Casey

The prediction was eye-popping even for Venezuela's collapsing economy: One million percent inflation by year's end, according to the International Monetary Fund.

On Monday, the fund released a periodic estimate of growth and inflation rates around Latin America, a roundup that included neighbors like Chile (where inflation should be headed to 3 percent) and Peru (where growth is predicted to reach 3.7 percent).

But it is Venezuela that continues to chart a different course from neighbors—with an increasingly breakneck economic disintegration.

Real gross domestic product, the value of goods and services produced in the economy and adjusted for inflation, is expected to fall by 18 percent in 2018, the third consecutive year of double-digit declines, the fund estimated.

And then there is the million-percent inflation.

"We are projecting a surge in inflation to 1,000,000 percent by end-2018 to signal that the situation in Venezuela is similar to that in Germany in 1923 or Zimbabwe in the late 2000's," the fund stated in its report.

With Venezuela's government not releasing official figures, the fund's prediction gave a concrete number to a situation that the country has felt with increasing urgency this year.

On the streets of Caracas, the capital, prices have skyrocketed to levels so high that many vendors now refuse to take bolívars bank notes, the national currency, because their value is eroding so fast. Some wealthy Venezuelans have turned to alternatives like Bitcoin. Store owners guess the prices they should be charging for goods; restaurant menus change weekly; and the price of the dollar, sold on the black market, has reached 3.5 million bolívars.

The inflation crisis comes on top of deep political repression led by President Nicolás Maduro, who was declared the winner of a vote this year that will extend his term until 2025. Lack of basic food and medicine has forced hundreds of thousands to flee the country. The authorities in neighboring Colombia said last week that 870,000 Venezuelans were now in the country.

In its report, the monetary fund blamed drops in oil production and "large macroeconomic imbalances" for the country's financial problems. It painted a grim picture for the months ahead, predicting that government officials would run fiscal deficits paid for by printing more money, "which will continue to fuel an acceleration of inflation."

For its part, Venezuela's government says the woes are a result of an "economic war" waged on it by the United States and wealthy businessmen hoarding supplies and raising prices.

While the million-percent figure may be largely symbolic, the fund's prediction that the country would soon mirror some of history's worst episodes of inflation caught the attention of analysts.

"At this point, the Titanic is at a 270 degree angle from where it should be," said Daniel Lansberg-Rodriguez, an economist at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

The period after World War I ruined the economy of the German Weimar Republic. Before the war, the dollar was worth 4.2 marks; by 1923, a dollar cost 4.2 trillion marks. Germany eventually replaced its currency and stabilized it, but millions were financially ruined.

Zimbabwe faced a similar fate under Robert Mugabe after land confiscations and strongman rule precipitated a financial collapse. At one point the country printed a note worth 100 trillion Zimbabwe dollars. The country eventually scrapped its currency as well.

But Mr. Lansberg-Rodriguez said Venezuela might be less successful in fixing its currency issues because of a history of botched

attempts to replace the bolívar. He added that Zimbabwe was in a better position to recover because it had a more diversified economy than Venezuela's.

"The level of chaos in Venezuela makes it that much more difficult to restore confidence and break out of this cycle," he said.

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Venezuela HIV Patients Without Medicine Try Home Remedies (Wyss, Weddle, MH)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Miami Herald

By Jim Wyss And Cody Weddle

When Jesus Eduardo Rodriguez could no longer find his life-saving HIV medicine in Venezuela, a country where everything from chicken to aspirin is in short supply, he turned to Google about a month ago looking for hope. What he found were stories about a Brazilian doctor using a plant called bay cedar, or guásimo, to treat his HIV-positive patients.

Out of options, Rodriguez started self-medicating with bay cedar. Buying the dark green leaves at the market, he mixes them with water in a blender and drinks the pungent brew three times a day.

"Ever since I started taking it, I've been feeling better," said Rodriguez, 50, who was diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus, which can lead to AIDS, in 2013. "Maybe this is the remedy that God sent me after all of my prayers?"

That Rodriguez and others like him are resorting to desperate DIY medicine is one more sign of how grave Venezuela's economic crisis has become. Even as the South American nation sits atop a sea of crude, decades of mismanagement and corruption have gutted a healthcare system that used to be the envy of the region.

Now, even basic medicine such as antibiotics and insulin can be hard or impossible to find. Doctors are fleeing in droves to escape hyperinflation and hunger. Those who do stay say they're hamstrung by constant shortages. Healthcare workers in different parts of the country have gone on strike more than 580 times this year demanding pay increases — but also bare necessities like bandages, painkillers and clean water.

For people with chronic diseases like HIV, the crisis can be deadly. As reports of HIV-related complications and deaths rise, it's as if Venezuela has stepped back in time, said Jesus Aguais, the founder of Aid For AIDS, an international non-profit that delivers unused HIV medication from abroad to needy Venezuelans.

"It's like Venezuela has returned to the 1980s, when people used to take shark cartilage and cat's claw to treat HIV," before anti-retroviral medication became the norm, he said. "This crisis is incredibly profound."

The situation is even more tragic because Venezuela was once a regional leader in HIV care. In 1999, under late President Hugo Chávez, the government launched the National AIDS Program that provided free drugs to some 77,000 HIV patients.

But amid declining oil prices, corruption, and draconian price and currency controls, the government is running out of cash to import life-saving drugs. President Nicolás Maduro blames the country's woes on U.S. financial sanctions and "economic warfare" being waged by his foes. Even so, the government has turned down offers of international aid.

That has made the work of nonprofits — groups that are essentially smuggling drugs into the country — all the more vital.

At the beginning of 2018, fewer than 30 percent of HIV patients registered with the government's free medication program were receiving any treatment, said Mauricio Gutierrez, an HIV and political activist in Caracas. Seven months later, as medicine shortages became even more acute, virtually no one can get anti-retroviral medication.

"Once again, we're starting to see the devastating effects of...HIV, and we're seeing people with HIV dying," he said. "These are deaths that could have been avoided."

On Saturday, battered by growing healthcare protests, Maduro announced he was earmarking the equivalent of \$93 million dollars for "high cost" oncology, transplant and HIV drugs. But it's unclear how quickly the medicine will make it to the country, or how long it might last.

No one's sure exactly how many people in Venezuela suffer from HIV. The country's Health Ministry stopped producing reliable information years ago. A government presentation on the AIDS crisis from 2014 said there were 101,871 people living with HIV at the time, and that that there had been 27,000 HIV and AIDS-related deaths from 1983 to 2011.

Since then, the number of those carrying HIV has undoubtedly grown as condoms are scarce and prohibitively expensive, and public health and HIV awareness campaigns have ground to a halt, said Jonathan Rodriguez, the president of Stop HIV, a Venezuelan non-profit.

Many doctors have fled the country and few HIV specialists remain, he said. Hospitals no longer have the tests needed to diagnose HIV, and most clinics don't have baby formula — critical for infants born to HIV-infected mothers, as breast feeding can, in some cases, transmit the virus.

"I don't see any reason out there to give us hope," Rodriguez said. "Even though there isn't any reliable information, we're very worried that HIV is on the rise."

The Caracas man who began self-medicating with bay cedar leaves was diagnosed with HIV five years ago after he developed histoplasmosis, a respiratory disease. When doctors discovered he also had HIV, his CD4 count, a measure of white blood cells, was 189. Anything below 200 is considered AIDS.

He was put on a potent cocktail of anti-retroviral drugs and the disease receded. But about a year ago, the medication became impossible to find. When Rodriguez stumbled across the information on the internet about bay cedar leaves, he passed it along to other HIV sufferers and his doctor, Carlos Perez.

Speaking from Caracas, Perez said he has about 160 HIV patients, and most of them are experimenting with bay cedar. The treatment has been used in Brazil and other places as a "complement" to anti-retroviral medication, he said. In Venezuela it's a last resort.

He said that many of his patients reported having a greater appetite, less pain and more energy after drinking brews made with bay cedar leaves or bark. And there's some scientific basis for the treatment. Bay cedar leaves are thought to be rich in tannins and polyphenols, which attack viruses, he explained, and there are ongoing studies looking at the impact of polyphenols on HIV.

Due to the "exorbitant costs" of testing HIV viral load in Venezuela, however, Perez said he had no conclusive evidence that the bay cedar treatment was working in his patients.

Rodriguez, a former airline employee, said several of his friends have died since 2017, due in part to the medicine shortage. And he blames the government — and its unwillingness to either fix the economy or concede power — for the problems. But he says he still has a burning desire to live.

"I want to see this country free, and once it's free, then God can take me," he said. "I ask the world to help us."

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Life In Haiti Was Getting Worse For Many Before Latest Riots (Lopez, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Ezequiel Abiu Lopez

Chicken is a staple of the Haitian diet but its price has doubled in four years. Cooking oil and rice have gone up 10 percent the last 12 months. A liter of milk costs more than half the daily minimum wage, putting it out of reach for most of the country.

The cost of living seems like it is spiraling out of control to many Haitians, making life even more of a struggle in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

"It's really hard," Cassandre Milord, an accountant in a small shop in Haiti's capital, said of the inflation that has been in double digits since 2014. "You never know how much money you need to go to the market. The prices go up every day."

It's a nearly universal complaint across Haiti, and it lies at the root of the four days of deadly protests over steep fuel price hikes that shut down Port-au-Prince earlier this month and raised the specter of the mass unrest that has paralyzed the country in the past. Inflation is a fact of life in much of the world, but amid so much misery it resonates painfully here with everyone from people selling small bags of rice in the street to owners of small businesses — everyone except the tiny elite.

"There's no money to send the kids to school," Arceline Charles said as she sat in a crowded downtown street selling eggs from a cardboard tray. "The country is a complete disaster."

The government of President Jovenel Moise, who took office in February 2017 after a messy, contested election, set off protests when it abruptly announced double-digit increases in the prices for gasoline, diesel and kerosene. It was part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund to eliminate fuel subsidies, to boost government revenue, in exchange for more support from member nations.

Officials may have thought the public would be distracted by that day's World Cup match featuring local favorite Brazil, but the reaction was explosive: People flooded into the streets, erecting flaming barricades and clashing with police. At least seven people died and dozens of businesses and cars were looted, burned and destroyed.

Prime Minister Jack Guy Lafontant, facing a no-confidence vote in parliament, resigned along with his Cabinet. But the government has yet to explain why it failed to accept the IMF recommendation to enact the price hikes gradually or whether it still intends to comply with recommendations that it modernize its economy by improving tax collection and increase spending on infrastructure, education and social services.

Moise appealed for calm as he looks for a new prime minister. "I can understand the situation facing many of our unemployed compatriots. Hunger and misery are crushing us," he said in a national address in Creole, the French-based language spoken by the majority of Haitians.

The president, a businessman and farmer who sold himself in his campaign as someone with the knowledge and expertise to lift the country, faces a steep challenge.

Haiti is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with the wealthiest living in walled-off mansions while about 60 percent of its nearly 10.5 million people struggle to get by on about \$2 a day. A January report by the U.S. Agency for International Development said about half the country is undernourished.

The fuel price increases, with diesel slated to rise about 40 percent and kerosene about 50 percent, would have rippled through an economy that is largely stagnant. Agriculture, the most important segment, is suffering from a long-standing drought and the devastation caused by Hurricane Matthew to one of the most fertile parts of the country in 2016.

The Central Bank has sought to contain inflation but prices are rising around 16 percent a year. And the bank's policy of devaluating the currency, the gourde, has in the eyes of many only made the situation worse because Haiti relies heavily on imports.

Even those fortunate enough to work or to own a business find it increasingly difficult to survive. The minimum wage is about \$150 a month, far below what is needed to support a family in Haiti.

"It is a situation of massive impoverishment, with many sectors of the middle class becoming poorer and an increasing percentage of people who really can't eat," said Camille Chalmers, an economist and director of a non-governmental group that promotes the rights of workers.

Milord, the accountant, said she already spends about a quarter of her daily pay, equivalent to about \$3, on transportation and lunch. "Imagine how people get by who only make the minimum wage," she said.

Business owners say they, too, are feeling the effects. Maxime Cantave, who opened a car wash and adjacent cafe in the Delmas area of the capital, said his business is down by a third over the past two years.

"People don't have any money," he said as two vehicles were getting cleaned and the cafe was empty on a recent afternoon, a time when both would normally be full.

Cantave returned to his native country from Florida after the devastating earthquake in January 2010, hoping to take advantage of the surge in international aid and private investment flowing into Haiti as part of the reconstruction. That investment has largely tapered off, hurting him as well as people like Benoit Vilceus, who runs a boutique hotel and a company that does construction and interior design.

Vilceus says his businesses were already struggling but he had to temporarily halt a construction project in the city of Les Cayes because of the recent unrest.

"This has been building up for a long time," he said of the unrest. "It was just a matter of time."

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Mexico Arrests Guatemalan Politician Wanted For Corruption (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Mexican authorities have detained a Guatemalan politician and businessman who fled his country two years ago after being accused of spearheading a corruption scheme.

Guatemala attorney general spokeswoman Julia Barrera says Luis Armando Rabbe was arrested in Monterrey.

Rabbe is a media entrepreneur-turned-congressman who allegedly authorized the creation of 164 phantom jobs in congress. The people who filled those posts did not show up for work.

Special prosecutor against impunity in Guatemala Juan Francisco Sandoval says Rabbe will be transferred to Guatemala to face charges of abuse of power and misuse of state funds.

It is unclear whether Rabbe has an attorney.

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2 Inmates Walk Out Of Mexican Prison Dressed As Guards (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Mexican authorities say two prisoners have walked out of a jail in northwestern Mexico dressed as guards with apparent assistance from two guards at the facility.

Sinaloa state public safety minister Inocente Hernandez says the inmates passed through six security filters as they exited the prison in Culiacan early Sunday. The inmates, Julian Grimaldi and Carlos Salmon, had both recently been transferred to the prison from higher security facilities.

Local media said Grimaldi is an alleged financial operator for the Sinaloa drug cartel, while Salmon is accused of having led deadly attacks on police by the Beltran Leyva drug cartel.

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Mexico Sees 16 Percent Rise In Murders In 1st Half Of 2018 (Stevenson, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Mark Stevenson

Homicides in Mexico rose by 16 percent in the first half of 2018, as the country again broke its own records for violence.

The Interior Department said over the weekend there were 15,973 homicides in the first six months of the year, compared to 13,751 killings in the same period of 2017.

The number is the highest since comparable records began being kept in 1997, including the peak year of Mexico's drug war in 2011.

At current levels, the department's measure would put national homicides at 22 per 100,000 population by the end of the year — near the levels of Brazil and Colombia at 27 per 100,000.

Security analyst Alejandro Hope noted "the figures are horrible, but there are some signs that are halfway encouraging."

For example, the growth in homicides seems to be flattening out; murders were up only about 4 percent compared to the second half of 2017. "The curve may be flattening out," Hope noted, though he cautioned it is too early to tell.

Some areas, like the northern border state of Baja California, showed big jumps in murder rates, which others saw sharp drops.

Baja California, home to the border city of Tijuana, saw 1,463 homicides in the first half of the year, a 44 percent increase over the same period of 2017.

Authorities have attributed the spate of killings to battles between the Jalisco and Sinaloa drug cartels for control of trafficking routes in Baja California. The state is now Mexico's second most violent, with a homicide rate for the first six months of the year equivalent to 71 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.

By comparison, Honduras and El Salvador — some of the deadliest countries in the world — have homicide rates of around 60 per 100,000.

Mexico's most dangerous state is Colima, on the Pacific coast, which saw a 27-percent rise in killings and now has a homicide rate of about 80 per 100,000. The Jalisco cartel is also active there.

The central state of Guanajuato, home to the colonial city of San Miguel Allende, saw a 122-percent increase in homicides, which were running at a rate of about 40 per 100,000. Authorities say much of the killing is related to gangs of fuel thieves who drill taps into government pipelines.

But in Baja California Sur, home to the resorts like La Paz and Los Cabos, a stepped-up police presence apparently helped reduce killings. The 125 homicides in the state were less than half the number registered in the first six months of 2017 and a quarter the number in the last half of 2017. Extra police and troops were sent in after warring drug gangs increased killings in the state in 2017.

Hope noted that in about half of Mexico's 32 states and the capital, murder rates didn't rise much or at all. "Now the growth is becoming concentrated" in some areas.

It is hard to tell why growth in homicide rates seem to have tapered off in historically violent states like Guerrero, which is home to more than a dozen gangs and is a main growing area for opium poppies.

"The growth in the use of fentanyl could be reducing the harvest of opium poppies, and that could be having an effect" on murder rates, Hope said.

Farmers in Guerrero say prices for opium paste have dropped to unprofitable levels because drug cartels are substituting it for cheaper, easier to obtain synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

Still, not all of Mexico's resort areas fared as well as Baja California Sur.

The Caribbean coast state of Quintana Roo, home to resorts like Cancun, Tulum and Cozumel, saw homicides rise by 132 percent, to the equivalent of about 35 killings per 100,000.

The state accounts for almost half of Mexico's national tourism income. And Mexico has seen international resorts like Acapulco and Zihuatanejo dragged down by a reputation for violence in the past.

"They can stop it (violence in Quintana Roo), but they have to take care of it very quickly," Hope said.

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Mexican Environmental Authority Fines Mennonite Community (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

Mexican authorities have slapped a 10.3 million peso (\$540,364) fine on a Mennonite community for clearing tropical vegetation that was home to a protected olive-throated parakeet.

The Attorney General for Environmental Protection said Monday that members of the community removed plants including endangered chit palm and jobillo trees from 3,251 acres (1,316 hectares) in Quintana Roo state, on the Yucatan Peninsula.

Indigenous Maya have long used the fronds of the chit palm to thatch roofs and make brooms, while fishermen have been known to construct lobster traps from its stems. The plant has become so scarce that Mexican law forbids removing the palms.

The jobillo is a flowering tree in the cashew family that is coveted for wood floors.

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Lawsuit Blocks Colombia Hope To Salvage Sunken Treasure (Wyss, MH)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Miami Herald

By Jim Wyss

One of the world's most fought-over sunken galleons — the 300-year-old San José, worth a potential \$17 billion — will remain on the ocean's floor a little longer, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said Monday.

During a televised event where he was expected to announce the name of the company that would help the government rescue the Spanish galleon, Santos instead said a local court had challenged the "public-private partnership" contract, forcing him to suspend the process.

The suit was brought by an anonymous group of "concerned citizens" — but Santos brushed it off as just one more fight over the San José's riches.

"There are so many interests involved," he said in a televised speech. "We've had to face enormous legal battles in national and [international] courts, in this administration and previous ones." SIGN UP

But he said the government's case and approach were solid.

Under the terms of the proposed contract, the winning company would be responsible for salvaging the wreck and building a museum in Cartagena to showcase the discovery. In exchange, it would be entitled to 50 percent of all the treasure not considered "national patrimony" — unique artwork and historically significant pieces.

The lawsuit argues that the ship and all of its cargo should belong to the state.

"History will not forgive us if new and sophisticated conquistadors, known by the [United Nations] as treasure hunters ... once again loot the galleon like it was prey," part of the lawsuit reads.

The latest legal battle over the San José began in December 2015, when Santos announced the storied galleon, which was sunk by the British Armada, had been found.

Immediately, the government faced challenges to its claim. In particular, Sea Search Armada, a Bellevue, Washington-based company, said it found the wreck in 1983 and that the coordinates it provided to the government at the time were crucial to the San José's "rediscovery" in 2015. In 2007, Colombia's Supreme Court ruled that Sea Search Armada had the right to half of any treasure at the site that wasn't considered "national patrimony."

At the time the San José was sunk by the British Armada in 1708, it was carrying six years' worth of accumulated treasure from Latin America back to Spain. In one of Sea Search Armada's many lawsuits, the company estimated the value of the cargo at between \$4 billion and \$17 billion.

Santos has dismissed Sea Search officials as greedy "treasure hunters" and he says the Colombian government found the site independently thanks to a team of international researchers, U.K.-based Maritime Archeology Consultants and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

And while the government has said the San José is not at the coordinates provided by Sea Search, its exact location remains a state secret.

The lead investigator on the government project, Roger Dooley, said he studied historical texts, wind patterns and other variables to narrow down the search area. On Monday, Santos said the expedition covered more than 80 nautical miles off the coast of Cartagena to find the wreck.

The discovery and salvage of the San José were meant to be one of the signature achievements of Santos' eight years in office, along with reaching a historical and controversial peace deal with the country's largest guerrilla group, the FARC.

On Monday, Santos said he had hoped to be the one to sign the contract. Instead, it will be up to incoming President Iván Duque, who will be sworn in on Aug. 7, to push the deal forward.

In a video, the government described how researchers returned to survey the wreck in 2016, revealing Chinese pottery, brass cannons and other artifacts.

"All of this is invaluable and will be handed over to the new government in its entirety," Santos said. "I ask the Colombian people to take care of this, like you must take care of the peace [deal] — take care of the treasure of the San José galleon."

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Chile Announces Wide Probe Into Catholic Church Sex Abuse (AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

Chile has investigated 158 members of the country's Roman Catholic Church for committing or covering up sexual abuse against minors and adults, the national prosecutor's office said Monday.

The investigations include reports of abuse by bishops, clerics and lay workers filed since 2000. Some of the cases date as far back as 1960.

In all, the number of victims is 266. That includes 178 children and teenagers, and 31 adults. The age of victims was not established in 57 other cases.

The nationwide figures follow an avalanche of sex abuse and cover-up cases that have recently embattled Chile's Catholic Church and prompted Pope Francis earlier this year to publicly denounce a "culture of abuse and cover-up."

The pope also said he was ashamed that neither he nor Chilean church leaders truly ever listened to victims as the country's abuse

scandal spiraled.

"The temptation would be to focus on those investigated within the Church, but today we must first focus on the number of victims, which is what worries us," the Chilean church's Episcopal Conference said in a statement after the report was released.

In the past, prosecutors in Chile have had to drop charges against members of the clergy accused of sex abuse because the statute of limitations had expired.

But the national prosecutor's office said it wants to "rigorously investigate all sex abuse cases committed by priests or people related to the Church" against children and adults, "regardless of whether the crimes have prescribed or not, because the victims have a right to be heard by the justice system."

The report said that out of the 158 people investigated in 144 separate investigations, 65 are bishops, priests or deacons who belong to a congregation; 74 do not belong to any congregation; 10 are lay persons in charge of pastoral parishes or linked to schools; and nine were undetermined.

Authorities said 36 of the 144 cases are currently being investigated, and 22 have been sent to another judicial office because the alleged crimes were committed before a judicial reform in 2000. Another 22 cases have resulted in convictions, while 64 cases have been either closed or temporarily suspended for various reasons.

Prosecutors said the vast majority of the sexual abuse crimes were committed by parish priests connected to an educational establishment. There are at least five cases where the heads of congregations or bishops in charge of a diocese are accused of cover-up or obstruction of an investigation.

"The prosecutor's announcement is the latest sign that the impunity of the Catholic Church is ending in Chile. Increasingly, Chilean bishops and clergy are being treated simply as fellow citizens, subject to secular laws," said Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, a U.S.-based group that compiles a database of clergy abuse.

"Today's report will encourage more Chilean victims to file complaints. Each complaint filed will lead to a safer church."

For decades, victims and their advocates have pointed to the hierarchy's culture of cover-up as the Vatican's main failure in dealing with the problem.

But Francis apparently came around to their view after meeting earlier this year with Chilean victims of the Rev. Fernando Karadima, the country's most notorious predator priest, and reading a 2,300-page report prepared for him by Vatican investigators, who also interviewed victims of Karadima and others in Chile.

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Chile Investigating 158 In Catholic Church Over Sex Abuse (Abramovich, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Paulina Abramovich

Chile is now investigating 158 members of the country's embattled Catholic Church – both clergymen and lay people – for perpetrating or concealing the sexual abuse of children and adults, prosecutors said on Monday.

The cases relate to incidents dating back as far as 1960 and involving 266 victims, including 178 children and adolescents, according to public prosecutor Luis Torres.

The prosecutor's statement offered the first general view of the extent and scope of the abuse scandal faced by Chile's Catholic Church – and how many people are implicated.

Last month, Pope Francis accepted the resignation of five Chilean bishops amid accusations of abuse and related cover-ups.

"The vast majority of reported incidents relate to sexual crimes committed by priests or people linked to educational establishments," Torres told reporters.

The entire strata of the Catholic Church – from bishops to monks – were involved in the crimes, as well as "lay people exercising some function in the ecclesiastical sphere," he noted.

There are 36 ongoing investigations, while 23 previous ones resulted in convictions and one other in an acquittal.

"There's no doubt that what the public prosecutor is doing is very positive and is starting to open the door to situations that

previously were treated as an open secret," Juan Carlos Claret, a member of a campaign group that opposed the presence of tainted bishop Juan Barros in his area, told AFP.

Barros is accused of covering for a pedophile priest and Francis was forced to apologize earlier this year for having hugged and defended the bishop on a visit to Chile in January.

Francis had named Barros to head the Osorno diocese, where Claret lives, in 2015 despite accusations by sex abuse victims that the prelate covered up the actions of disgraced pedophile priest Fernando Karadima in the 1980s and 1990s.

– ‘Information held back’ –

According to Claret, the Chilean Episcopal Conference already knew in 2007 about 120 priests involved in sexual abuse. He says that means there must be more people involved than the number revealed by prosecutors on Monday.

"Some information is still being held back," added Claret, a leading voice in denouncing the clerical abuse of children in the country that led Francis to overhaul Chile's Catholic Church.

Karadima has been suspended for life by the Vatican but never faced prosecution in Chile because the statute of limitations had elapsed by the time a case was opened in 2010.

Earlier that year, he had been found guilty of sexually abusing children by the Vatican, which sentenced him to a life of prayer and ordered him to pay compensation.

In May, the entire Chilean hierarchy of bishops tendered their resignations over the abuse scandal rocking the Church.

Since 2000, about 80 Catholic priests have been reported to authorities in Chile for alleged sexual abuse.

Ten days ago, prominent priest Oscar Munoz was arrested over allegations of sexual abuse and rape of at least seven children.

Francis has repeatedly apologized to parishioners over the scandal, admitting the Church failed "to listen and react" to allegations spanning decades, but vowed to "restore justice."

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Brazil Protest Marks Massacre Anniversary (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

Several hundred Brazilians have demonstrated to demand an end to police brutality against Afro-Brazilians and slum residents.

It comes on the 25th anniversary of what is called the "Candelaria massacre," when police fired on homeless children and teenagers who were sleeping in front of Candelaria Church in the heart of Rio de Janeiro. Eight youths aged 11 to 19 died.

Three officers were sentenced but were later pardoned.

Acrobats led Monday's march on stilts, wearing bloody camouflage outfits to symbolize violent tactics.

Protesters also criticized the government's move to impose military control over policing and prisons in Rio after an especially violent Carnival season.

Jurema Werneck is Amnesty International's executive director in Brazil. She says official data show killings by state agents have increased by 60 percent since last year.

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'Our Hearts Are In Pieces': Gunman Identified In Toronto Shooting That Left 2 Dead, 13 Injured (Onyanga-Omara, Bacon, Hayes, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Jane Onyanga-Omara, John Bacon And Christal Hayes

Authorities have identified the gunman who they say was behind a mass shooting rampage in a Toronto neighborhood on Sunday that took the lives of a woman and a child, and left 13 others injured.

Police say Faisal Hussain, 29, of Toronto was behind the rampage that created chaos on a thoroughfare crowded with bars and restaurants. His family, in a statement given to reporters Monday evening, said Hussain suffered from "severe" mental illness,

"struggling with psychosis and depression his entire life."

Hussain died after a shootout with police. It's unclear whether he was killed by officer's gunfire or died by suicide.

Authorities did not say what motivated Hussain's attack, but Canada's Ministry of Public Safety, in a statement to The Globe and Mail in Toronto, seemed to tamper down the possibility of terrorism.

"At this time, there is no national security nexus to the investigation," Hilary Peirce, a spokeswoman for the ministry, told the newspaper.

Police Chief Mark Saunders said an 18-year-old woman and a 10-year-old girl were killed in the shooting. The wounded victims ranged in age from 10 to 59, and some might have life-changing injuries, he said.

Hussain died within minutes of an exchange of gunfire with responding police officers, a few blocks from the carnage, Saunders said.

"We do not know why this happened yet," Saunders said Monday. "This is still a new investigation."

Hussain's family described him as helpless, explaining interventions, professionals, medications and therapy were unsuccessful in helping to deal with his "mental health challenges."

"While we did our best to seek help for him throughout his life of struggle and pain, we could never imagine that this would be his devastating and destructive end," the family said. "Our hearts are in pieces for the victims and for our city as we all come to grips with this terrible tragedy."

Saunders said the shooting, in the Greektown neighborhood, was not random. He asked the public for help through eyewitness information, videos and photos from the scene.

"I heard 'pop, pop' and then I turned because I thought it was fireworks ... and then the mother of a friend of mine goes, 'They're shooting at us – run inside!'" Stavy Karnouskou, who was standing outside a bar with friends when the gunfire began, told the Toronto Star.

The attack in Canada's largest city came three months after a 25-year-old man in a rented truck mowed down pedestrians along iconic Yonge Street, killing 10 and injuring 15.

"There is a newness to this in Toronto," Saunders said of the violence. "There is no magic pill to take and say 'All is well.' "

Mayor John Tory said the city has a gun problem. Although mass shootings are rare in Canada's largest city, police recently have deployed dozens of additional officers to deal with a spike in gun violence in the city.

"Guns are too readily available to too many people," Tory said.

So far this year, gun-related deaths have accounted for 23 of Toronto's 52 homicides in comparison to 16 fatal shootings in the first six months of 2017, according to the Toronto Globe and Mail.

With more than 2 million people, Toronto is among the biggest cities in North America. In Chicago, which has a slightly lower population, there have been 290 homicides, according to a database maintained by the Chicago Sun-Times.

A video captured by one witness of Sunday's shooting spree shows a man dressed in black walking quickly and firing three shots from the sidewalk into at least one shop or restaurant.

John Tulloch said he and his brother had just gotten out of their car when he heard about 20 to 30 gunshots.

"We just ran. We saw people starting to run so we just ran," he said.

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Toronto Mayor Calls For Total Disarmament After Mass Shooting (Morton, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Victor Morton

Canada is often portrayed — by film-maker Michael Moore and others — as a nation with common-sense gun control and fewer murders.

Apparently that's not enough for Toronto's mayor, who called Monday for the total disarmament of the city — saying nobody needs a gun — in the wake of a gunman's rampage through its Danforth district.

Mayor John Tory was cited in the National Post as not only calling the shooting that killed two people and wounded 13 others an "unspeakable" act, but adding that the city needs even tighter restrictions on guns.

"Why does anyone in this city need to have a gun at all?" he said, going on to claim that total disarmament would be worth it if it prevented a single mass shooting.

"I know answering questions like this won't fully eliminate tragedies like this, but even if we can prevent one of these incidents, then in my view it is a discussion worth having and having very soon," he said.

Washington, D.C., had a similar total ban on handguns, but it was struck down in 2008 by the landmark Heller decision on the basis that it violated the U.S. Constitution's Second Amendment.

Even before Sunday night's rampage, blamed on a Toronto man named Faisal Hussain, the city had seen in recent weeks a spike in shootings.

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Canada Arrests Man Who Tried To Stab Guard On Parliament Hill: Media (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Canadian police have arrested a man who tried to stab a member of the ceremonial guard on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Monday, the defense ministry said.

"Due to the quick reaction of our soldiers, RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and Parliamentary Protective Services, the potential threat was identified and neutralized," the defense ministry said in an email to AFP.

"No one was injured during this incident."

The man was arrested at about 10:15 am (1415 GMT) on the lawn of Parliament Hill, during the daily changing of the guard parade, a popular tourist attraction.

Ottawa police have opened an inquiry into the matter, the defense ministry said, without offering further details.

In October 2014, a gunman shot and fatally wounded a soldier guarding the tomb of the unknown soldier at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, before opening fire inside the nearby parliament building where he was shot and killed.

That attack came two days after a radicalized Canadian Muslim used his car to run over two soldiers south of Montreal, killing one of them.

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Toronto Shooting Shakes City Amid A Rash Of Violence (Porter, Bilefsky, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Catherine Porter And Dan Bilefsky

The shots rang out, one by one and in bursts. Diners at the outdoor tables of the packed bars and restaurants along the Danforth, the main drag of one of Toronto's hottest neighborhoods, dived for cover.

In the end, two people were killed, including a 10-year-old girl, and 13 were wounded.

The shooting Sunday night in a neighborhood that is home to hipsters and young families, where even the smallest house sells for \$1 million, was the latest in a rash of violence that has sent the largest city in Canada reeling.

Toronto has awakened to a grim new reality: Despite Canada's tight gun laws, the city is gripped with some of the same problems that bedevil larger places with laxer rules.

Late on Monday, the police identified the gunman as Faisal Hussain, 29, a Toronto resident. He was found dead close to the scene of the attack after the police exchanged fire with him.

The authorities refused to speculate about a motive for the shooting, or about whether it was an act of terrorism. "It's way too early to rule out anything," said Mark Saunders, Toronto's police chief.

A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Public Safety said the investigation into the shooting, while in its early stages, was not treating it as a matter of national security for now.

Mr. Hussain's family, in a statement, said he had suffered from severe mental health problems, including psychosis and depression, his entire life.

"The interventions of professionals were unsuccessful," the family said. "Medications and therapy were unable to treat him. While we did our best to seek help for him throughout his life of struggle and pain, we could never imagine that this would be his devastating and destructive end."

The statement, issued by a communications specialist, offered the "deepest condolences to the families who are now suffering on account of our son's horrific actions."

The shooting came after a spate of attacks in Toronto since spring.

In April, 10 people were killed when the driver of a rental van struck dozens of pedestrians on a sidewalk.

Last month, a driver took a shotgun out of her trunk and fired at a 21-year-old pedestrian, injuring her and a 69-year-old man riding his bike.

That followed the shooting in June of two sisters, ages 5 and 9, by two men who pulled out guns at a busy playground.

Newspapers and radio shows have throbbed with concern that the city is entering another "Summer of the Gun," as 2005 was deemed by Torontonians. That year, 52 people were killed and 359 were shot and wounded.

So far this year, the city has had 308 victims and 29 fatalities from shootings, according to data from the Toronto Police Service.

Like shootings in the United States, the drumbeat of attacks has brought gun control to the forefront of public debate.

"Things like this don't happen in Toronto, but these last three months" said Nick Chitilian, the owner of a coffee shop on the Danforth that was cordoned off by police tape and remained a crime scene on Monday.

Inside, the only people drinking coffee were police officers, reviewing the footage from Mr. Chitilian's six surveillance cameras.

One of the cameras, he said, captured the gunman shooting at three women who were running before him, then aiming inside the cafe at people there, shattering the window.

"They got away with the hair of their necks," said Mr. Chitilian, who has owned the building for 30 years. "It's freaky."

Two people were not so lucky. One of the two victims who were killed was Reese Fallon, 18.

Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, a member of Parliament from the area, described her as a "local young Liberal, smart, passionate and full of energy." Ms. Fallon was set to study nursing at a university in the fall, according to CP24, a Canadian news outlet.

Toronto's mayor, John Tory, called the rampage a "cowardly act of violence" and "an attack on our city itself."

"I've said for some time that the city has a gun problem," Mr. Tory told the City Council on Monday. "Guns are far too readily available to far too many people."

Compared with American cities, the number of shootings in Toronto is low. That is by design. Canada does not have an enshrined right to bear arms, and over the years it has introduced strict gun laws.

While many Americans can buy a handgun in less than an hour, in Canada it takes at least a month; purchasers must pass background checks screening for criminal records, mental health issues and a history of domestic violence. They must also meet other requirements, including passing a written and practical test and getting character references.

Despite these restrictions, gun control advocates say the measures do not go far enough. One problem, they say, is loopholes that allow for firearms to be transported under the pretext they are destined for a border crossing, a gun show or a gunsmith.

"You've heard me ask the question as to why anyone would need to buy 10 or 20 guns, which they can lawfully do under the present laws," Mr. Tory told City Council.

And, he added, "Why does anyone in this city need to have a gun at all?"

According to the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, from 2013 to 2016, criminal incidents related to guns jumped 30 percent, while gun homicides increased by more than 60 percent.

Although some handguns are smuggled across the border from the United States, Mario Harel, president of Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, told a legislative committee in May that "50 percent of all handguns used in crime, that we have been able to trace, have been diverted from legal Canadian firearm owners."

Last March, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government proposed tightening the country's gun laws by expanding background checks for all gun owners beyond the current five-year period and restoring requirements on sellers to keep records for some rifle and shotgun sales across the country.

But the bill has yet to pass, and the debate about gun control in the country remains fierce, pitting rural residents who resent the red tape — and the implication that they are criminals — against urban dwellers who do not hunt and largely think only the police should have guns.

Mr. Saunders, Toronto's police chief, said there was no "magic pill" to tackling gun crime in the city. "I live in the city of Toronto and I, too, have concerns," he said. He added, "Other cities go through this more than we have."

Canadians across the country, including the prime minister, expressed shock and grief at Sunday's shooting. So did local residents who crowded around the edges of the police tape sealing off blocks of the Danforth.

The area, once the domain of Greek immigrants, has been transformed. Its main street is now lined with buzzing bars and restaurants whose crowds spill out onto the sidewalk. Ice cream parlors, health food stores and fruit and vegetable stands all compete for space.

"It's really sad this has happened in this area," said Milton Kong, 32, a financial analyst who was having dinner with a friend at a Greek restaurant when he heard volleys of shots and dived under his table for cover. "There have been lots of incidents this year. I am growing more concerned."

The street is known for its festival of food, music and dance, Taste of the Danforth, which draws huge crowds over one weekend every summer.

On Monday, businesses and local officials were not thinking about the festival. They were planning a memorial.

"I'm shocked," said Mary Fragedakis, a city councilor who has lived in the area for all her 47 years. "I'm in complete disbelief. I'm just heartbroken."

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Gunman Kills 2, Wounds 13 In Toronto Before Being Found Dead (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

The man in black prowled for targets on Toronto's bustling Danforth Avenue at 10 p.m. Sunday, pistol in hand.

He shot at groups of people, witnesses said, then melted away in a frantic zigzag down the street. Victims were sprawled inside businesses as strangers gave first aid to strangers along a glass-pocked scene over hundreds of yards.

The police caught up to him. A gunfight ensued, authorities said, and the man fled down an alley. He was later found dead.

An 18-year-old woman and a 10-year-old girl were killed, Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders told reporters on Monday, and 13 others were wounded. The victims ranged in age from 10 to 59. The slain 18-year-old was identified as Reese Fallon, a recent high school graduate who was to attend McMaster University in the fall, the Associated Press reported.

The motive for the shootings was not clear. Authorities identified the shooter as Faisal Hussain, 29, of Toronto, the AP reported. No motive has been ruled out, including terrorism, Saunders said.

Video posted on the Internet reportedly shows the gunman firing at least three shots toward a business.

Other video recorded sounds of gunshots echoing off buildings in an area of restaurants and shops known as Greektown. Saunders described the avenue as "one of the busiest streets in the country."

It was not immediately clear whether the gunman was shot by police or whether he killed himself.

Saunders declined to discuss that portion of the investigation, telling reporters that Ottawa's Special Investigations Unit is mandated to probe officer-involved incidents. Monica Hudon, an SIU spokeswoman, told reporters that an autopsy will be performed Tuesday to determine the cause of death.

Five patients arrived at St. Michael's Hospital in serious condition, three needing immediate lifesaving surgery, acting medical director Najma Ahmed told reporters Monday. All five are still being treated, she said.

Witnesses said that he fired into businesses and at people on the street along Danforth Avenue, the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. reported.

"It was a very rapid and fluid incident," Detective Sgt. Terry Browne, the lead homicide investigator, told reporters. "We have several scenes within the scene."

Toronto Mayor John Tory called the shooting a "despicable act" targeting innocents.

"While our city will always be resilient in the face of such attacks, it does not mean such a cowardly act committed against our residents is any less painful," Tory tweeted.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau offered his condolences Monday.

"The people of Toronto are strong, resilient and brave — and we'll be there to support you through this difficult time," he wrote on Twitter, in both English and French.

Mes pensées accompagnent les personnes touchées par la tragédie qui a eu lieu la nuit dernière sur l'avenue Danforth. Je souhaite un prompt rétablissement aux personnes blessées. Les Torontois sont forts, résilients et courageux, et nous les appuierons en cette période difficile.— Justin Trudeau (@JustinTrudeau) July 23, 2018

Ontario lawmakers took to social media en masse to comment on the shooting rampage.

Jill Andrew, who represents Toronto in the provincial parliament, thanked first responders, along with trauma specialists who will be tasked with helping grieving families cope with the killings.

My evening was nice until I heard shooting right out of my place on the danforth. So scary!! The gun violence in Toronto is crazy. pic.twitter.com/eNHLIUp6r— n□ (@nsxoxoii) July 23, 2018

The attack shattered an otherwise peaceful night in Greektown, a name stemming from the inhabitants who filled the neighborhood after World War II.

The area, with its mix of restaurants, is the scene of the popular Taste of the Danforth festival, a yearly three-day food and entertainment event in August that pulls in more than 1.5 million visitors, according to its website.

Tanya Wilson heard the gunshots and walked up the stairs of her business, Skin Deep Tattoo Studio. She told the Globe and Mail that two frightened gunshot victims pleaded for help. She shut the door behind them and turned off the lights.

"There was quite a bit of blood coming from both of their legs," she said.

Wilson said she was well-equipped with surgical gloves and gauze. She used an extension cord and strips of clothes as makeshift tourniquets, trying to calm the victims about a block from where the shooter was found dead.

Andrew Van Eek, who lives near the scene of the shooting, told the CBC that he stuck his head out of his window after the gunfire started.

"There was a lot of commotion in the street," he told the CBC. "I saw somebody come just down the sidewalk and shoot into Demetres restaurant."

Another witness told CTV that he estimated that the gunman fired about 20 shots.

"And then, I saw the carnage as I ran down the street here to kind of follow the gunfire," he told the station. "I saw at least four people shot."

Jody Steinhauer was strolling into a restaurant on Sunday night with her partner, two sets of grandparents and her children. It was her birthday celebration, she told Radio New Zealand. But when the party was entering the establishment, they suddenly heard what sounded like firecrackers. Restaurant staff ordered everyone to the back of the room. Get down, they said.

"All you could hear was screaming," Steinhauer recalled. "There was a woman coming in off the street yelling, 'Help me! Help me!' She had been shot in the leg."

The woman was taken into the back of the room and stabilized on a bench. "Thank goodness there was a doctor in the restaurant," Steinhauer said.

The gunman was found dead four doors down from where Steinhauer and her family were hiding, she said.

"It's just terrifying," she said. "Toronto is a very safe city, with a lot of people from a lot of cultures. But who knows what really happened. Time will tell."

It has been a violent year for Toronto. In April, 25-year-old Alek Minassian allegedly mowed down pedestrians in a shopping district with a van, leaving 10 dead and dozens injured. Minassian is facing 10 counts of first-degree murder.

But the latest deadly shooting also comes as Toronto has witnessed an increase in gun violence over the summer months. Eleven people were shot in a span of seven days at the end of June, the CBC reported. As of July 16, there have been 220 shootings in the city in 2018, police department statistics show. Gun-related fatalities this year are up 50 percent from 2017, according to the BBC.

The violence has sparked considerable public outcry. In response to the pressure, the city launched a \$15 million “gun violence reduction plan” last week. Under the proposal, an additional 200 police officers have been deployed on Toronto streets in targeted areas between 7 p.m. and 3 a.m. This will continue for the remainder of the summer.

In his brief comments Monday morning, Tory, the mayor, reiterated that the Danforth shooting was “evidence of a gun problem” in the city.

“Guns are too readily available to too many people,” he said.

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Police Identify Gunman In Toronto Danforth Shooting (Morton, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Victor Morton

Authorities in Canada have identified the gunman suspected in the shooting rampage in Toronto that killed two people and wounded 13 others.

“Ontario’s police watchdog identifies man responsible for Toronto’s Danforth shooting as Faisal Hussain,” the Canadian Press reported Monday afternoon.

In a statement later Monday afternoon, his family said Hussain suffered from psychosis and depression but that they “could never imagine that this would be his devastating and destructive end.”

The Hussains’ statement said medications and therapy weren’t improving matters for him.

The family expressed also expressed condolences, saying their “hearts are in pieces for the victims.”

Hussain was killed in a gunfight with police after his rampage through restaurants and cafes in the fashionable neighborhood, though it wasn’t immediately clear whether he was killed by police bullets or committed suicide. An autopsy is scheduled for Tuesday.

Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders refused to speculate on a motive but told reporters he could not rule out terrorism.

According to witness accounts, the gunman was clad in black and fired his weapon randomly into a series of eateries, killing a 10-year-old girl and an 18-year-old woman.

Ontario’s police watchdog the gunman was found dead near Danforth Avenue after he had exchanged gunfire with two officers on a side street.

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Wave After Wave Of Garbage Hits The Dominican Republic (Karasz, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Palko Karasz

Come for the beaches, say tourism ads for the Dominican Republic.

But it has some beaches you might want to skip right now.

The Caribbean nation is known for sapphire seas and ivory beaches, but it is grappling with waves of garbage washing up on its shores, a vivid reminder of the presence of thousands of tons of plastic in the world’s oceans.

Those piles, most notably the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” are usually far from human settlements, to say nothing of resort destinations.

But instead of visitors relaxing on Montesinos Beach in the capital, Santo Domingo, there has been an altogether different scene, one unlikely to wind up on a postcard: Hundreds of city workers and volunteers who have been waging an uphill battle against wave after wave of sludgy garbage.

Images have shown teams using pikes, shovels and excavators to lift the garbage, only to be met with new waves carrying even more.

Sixty tons of garbage have been collected on the beach since last week, Reuters reported. The haul included plastic bottles and Styrofoam takeout boxes, Parley for the Oceans, an organization that works to reduce plastic waste in the world's oceans, said in a statement.

The images are shocking, but perhaps not for people who live in the Dominican Republic. "It happens pretty much all the time if there is a strong rainfall or a storm," said Cyril Gutsch, the founder of Parley for the Oceans, in a telephone interview.

The phenomenon is not confined to the Dominican Republic, he said, and can be seen in many developing nations with a coastline. "Everybody uses the rivers and the beaches as dump sites."

What is happening in the Dominican Republic is only a small symptom of the larger global problem, Mr. Gutsch said. Plastic dumped in and near rivers washes into the ocean, and only a small percentage bounces back onto shore. The majority makes it to the high seas.

Mr. Gutsch said that recycling was a short-term solution and amounted to only a bandage. Parley for the Oceans advocates phasing out single-use plastic altogether.

The plastic waste washing onto Montesinos Beach comes from the Ozama River, which flows into the Caribbean nearby, one of those in charge of the cleanup, Gen. Rafael Antonio Carrasco, told Reuters.

"What you don't see in the picture is all the toxic stuff," Mr. Gutsch said, adding that once it is out in the open, plastic breaks down and releases chemicals that are impossible to capture.

Wildlife trapped in the debris and humans affected by the toxic particles in the waves are all at risk, local environmentalists said.

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Argentina Leader Announces Controversial Armed Forces Reform (Rey, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Debora Rey

In a radical reform of Argentina's defense doctrine, President Mauricio Macri said Monday he is removing a ban on military involvement in fighting crime, terrorist threats and other internal security issues.

Macri said he will modify a 2006 decree that limited the armed forces to defense against attacks by another country.

"It's important that they can collaborate in internal security, mainly by providing logistic support in the border zones," he said at a public act held at a military base.

"We need armed forces that are capable of facing the challenges of the 21st century, but we have an outdated defense system, the product of years of underinvestment and the absence of a long-term policy."

Argentina's current defense doctrine was adopted with the country's 1976-1983 military dictatorship in mind. Human rights groups estimate up to 30,000 people were kidnapped, tortured or killed during that period.

Human rights groups immediately criticized the decision, saying it could authorize military espionage, lead to repression and increase violence.

"Involving the armed forces in security issues puts at risk the civil government and human rights ... we have to reject this reform and defend the strict separation between defense and security," said the Buenos Aires-based Center for Legal and Social Studies.

Former Defense Minister Agustín Rossi said separating national defense from internal security has been a state policy since 1983 and should remain unchanged.

"Involving the armed forces in drug trafficking issues is illegal. In countries like Colombia, Brazil and Mexico this failed, and is being carefully examined now," said Rossi, who was in the left-of-center administration of President Cristina Fernández, who preceded the conservative Macri.

The current defense minister, Oscar Aguad, defended the plan, saying the change seeks only to give logistical support to security forces, including those fighting drug trafficking in the northern border region with Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay.

"We're trying to help them dissuade transnational groups from drug trafficking and terrorism to come into Argentina. They must block

them from entering our territory," Aguad said.

For now, the government plans to issue the changes through a decree instead of a bill sent to Congress.

"We know that this transformation won't be easy," Macri said. "Profound changes are never easy. But this is the first step to build the modern, professional and equipped armed forces that Argentina needs."

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Trying To Protect – And Expand – Cuba's Undiscovered Musical Legacy (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

The air conditioner is broken, and all Vicente Prieto Borrego can do is wait.

Borrego knows what's at stake: Thousands of magnetic tapes, records, cassettes and CDs recorded by EGREM, or Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales, the Cuban music label founded in 1964. The archive should be kept at exactly 62.6 degrees Fahrenheit. That's impossible with an air conditioner whose filter is clogged by dust.

Borrego, EGREM's archivist, worries that two generations of sonic history, the very heart of this country's breathtaking musical legacy, could melt.

"It's as if an organ, a part of my organism, were in crisis," Borrego said, looking down at a separated magnetic tape he had just gently adjusted back into its ring shape. "You suffer. You suffer a lot."

The music within these walls stretches across time and genre, from its start in 1964, when Fidel Castro banned Beatles music in Cuba, to last month, when a record called Okan Yoruba was produced. EGREM's catalogue includes about 30,000 tracks, with recordings by pianist, composer and arranger Chucho Valdés, who has won six Grammys and three Latin Grammys; singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, who helped lead the nueva trova music movement after the revolution; and Los Van Van, one of the, most popular Cuban dance bands.

There is modern jazz, psychedelic-era rock and the traditional, pre-revolutionary Cuban music made famous by the Buena Vista Social Club. That band, made up of some of the country's most elder musicians, rose to prominence in the late 1990s after American guitarist Ry Cooder recruited them to record an album that later won a Grammy.

"We have very good music. We have very good musicians," said Ernesto Reyes Perea, director of EGREM's recording studios, sitting in one of the company's two historic Estudios Areito studios, where a number of Cuban legends, including Rodriguez and Valdés, have cut tracks. "Our strategies . . . are focused on taking the Cuban product, the musical Cuban product, further outside our borders."

There was a time when Cuban music was not a secret. Singer Celia Cruz, born in Havana, was a major star in her home country and became even bigger after leaving Cuba in 1960. She recorded 23 gold albums and, in 1994, received a U.S. National Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton. Bandleader Pérez Prado, who left Cuba for Mexico in 1949, became known as the King of Mambo after scoring a No. 1 hit with 1955's "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White." But the overthrow of Batista four years later — and the subsequent U.S. embargo — meant that Cruz, Prado and others could not return home and that the Cuban-born musician who remained in the country would generally be limited by geography and access to resources.

Not only that, the embargo created other problems for the players left behind. Guitar strings and reeds became hard-to-find commodities. So was top-notch recording equipment.

Those limited resources remain a central issue today, as EGREM's staffers try to preserve what they consider the center of Cuban music's heritage under less-than-ideal conditions. "It makes me very sad, needless to say," Emilio Cueto, a Cuban-born author and cultural expert who leads tours for Smithsonian Journeys and today lives in Washington, said of the archives recent state. "There are usually two reasons for this state of affairs to occur: lack of interest or of resources. In the case of Cuba, it is mostly the latter."

State-run music

There is clearly no lack of interest in Cuba. EGREM's Areito studios, located in downtown Havana, are thumping with activity.

On a recent afternoon, veteran music producer Jorge Rodriguez sits in front of a corner stage in the company's salon — where there's a matinee concert almost every day — and talks of Cuba's rich history of recorded music. Panart Records was created in 1944, one of Cuba's first independent labels, with headquarters in what is now the Areito studios on a street called San Miguel. For nearly two decades, Panart was Cuba's main music company, and for even longer, Areito the only studio. After Fidel Castro took

over in 1959, he seized Panart and its assets.

"The revolution was very fast in its nationalizations," Rodriguez said. The then-new socialist state took control of private companies — electrical, light, phone, sugar — and record companies were no exception.

In an effort to preserve Cuban music that already existed and also to nationalize the art form, the government collected as many original tapes and molds it could from 1959 to 1964, when it created EGREM. Those thousands of artifacts now make up one of EGREM's three archives.

"It was a start, if not from zero, then very close to zero," said Élsida González Portal, EGREM's musicologist and a radio host who has a 5 a.m. prerecorded show about Cuban music that airs on Radio Taíno, a subsidiary of the state's television and radio management organization, at 93.3 FM.

For the next three decades, as the country's now-only record company, it controlled all forms of Cuban music. "Every big Cuban artist has gone through EGREM," said Rodriguez, who remembers watching Buena Vista Social Club record its self-titled album in the Areito studio in 1996.

But the day EGREM started recording is the day its struggles began. "State-run" in a socialist country considered an enemy of the United States meant the fledgling company couldn't easily gain access to technology from capitalist states, Portal said, while sitting on her floral couch underneath a decades-old accumulation of books and records in her living room on the outskirts of Havana.

With the embargo, EGREM had to buy its magnetic tapes from Germany and recording equipment from Russia, Portal said. And, of course, the company couldn't easily export its songs to United States, the largest music market in the world.

The result is that artists and engineers have never had the access to proper, up-to-date and robust materials and equipment to do their jobs. They often have to rig up equipment to execute the work they need to do.

Producers at one of Areito's studios try to make do with a 2004 version of Pro Tools, the popular recording, editing and mixing software. The program itself operates on a Mac G4, a computer model Apple replaced in 2004.

Then there are the distribution issues. The United States has seen a dramatic rise in sales and streams of digital music, but the format presents considerable challenges in Cuba.

The Internet and any associated streaming services are unavailable in most homes and restricted where accessible. The government has created public WiFi hotspots outside, in parks, but access requires buying one-to five-hour dial-up cards for \$1 to \$5 from hotels and street kiosks, scratching off a log-in code and signing on. Even that is cost-prohibitive for many, who often make less than \$25 a month from their jobs.

Music without borders

There have been efforts to in recent years take EGREM's music around the world.

In 2015, Sony Music Entertainment and EGREM were able to strike a distribution deal under the "informational materials" exemption, which applies to works of art, music included, restricted by U.S. sanctions.

The first installment of compilations, titled "The Real Cuban Music," featuring six genres — mambo, timba, guaracha, son, guajira and cha-cha — in six 14-song volumes, each with a dancing tutorial DVD, was released in 2017. The two companies also remastered songs from essential Cuban artists such as Omara Portuondo and Orquesta Aragón for other compilation albums. This music is now available on streaming platforms such as Spotify and for purchase in digital and physical format. Physical copies of the albums were recently listed on Amazon for \$10.69 and \$11.98.

The deal was hailed when it was announced, with Billboard's account running under the headline, "Inside Sony's Cuban Coup."

But the arrangement hasn't substantially changed daily operations — or the operating budget — in Havana. Part of the problem is that even with the deal, EGREM is playing catch-up in the already packed reissue market.

"It hasn't been easy," Reyes said, noting that they have to "create an interest for it among all the music that is made at the world level and, all the while, in competition with the big markets and big music distributors."

There are plans, at EGREM, to renovate the most historic of the label's studios.

The studio will be revamped with new sound equipment such as microphones and a mixing console and new flooring. For the project, Reyes said, they are counting on a collaboration coordinated in part by the Vienna-headquartered United Nations Industrial Development Organization, which identified areas of potential in Cuba's music industry and helped get donations to fund the renovations.

"Obviously, the best birthday gift that we can give EGREM is the enhancement of one of its most important parts — the recording studios," Reyes said.

Down the stairs and past two hallways from the studio, Borrego, the archivist, looks through his thick glasses at the pile of CDs sitting on his desk, waiting to be digitized on a recent, sweltering afternoon in May. He is in the comfort of air conditioning right now, but the archives, just steps away, are still bathed in far too much heat.

When Panart ran the show, he said in a previous interview, the room where the pre-1964 archives now sit — the ones with Josephine Baker, Ernesto Lecuona and Nat King Cole material — used to be a changing room for artists getting ready for a studio session. The archive is tucked behind a door that's bolted shut with a piece of wood.

These archives have functioning air conditioning, but the possibility of a malfunction is always lingering. Things break down from time to time, Borrego said, and still, only 90 percent of the archives are digitized.

"Here is the original heritage . . . that is why we conserve" the tapes, he said. "This is the most ancient part of EGREM."

Borrego paces in between stacks and from archive room to archive room. He hopes one day the music isn't confined to a cramped space with such vulnerable conditions.

"Music can't have borders. Art, culture can't have borders," he said. He wants people all over the world to hear, and experience, what Cubans have created. "Everything," he added, "is possible."

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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Book Fair Turns The Page For Literature In Somaliland (Belaud, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Cyril Belaud

Aged just 16, Abdishakur Mohamed confidently presented his latest work to the Hargeisa book fair, an event that has transformed Somaliland's literary scene over the past decade.

Abdishakur spent four years writing "Ab-ka haleel" ("In the footsteps of our ancestors"), intended as a rebuttal of friends who he says were not "embracing their culture".

"Instead they see it as unimportant, and their Somali identity is in danger," he told AFP.

At the first annual event in 2008, organisers only exhibited a handful of books borrowed from friends and attracted just 200 visitors.

Ten years on and literature has taken a prominent place in Somaliland's culture.

New writers have emerged, volumes are being edited, book clubs formed and public libraries opened.

The book fair, being held from Saturday July 21 to Thursday July 26, has been a key factor in Somaliland's embrace of literature.

The fair now has international appeal and attracts exhibitors from across the world while helping to raise awareness of the self-proclaimed country's relative stability in contrast to Somalia.

Somaliland broke away from the rest of the troubled Horn of Africa country in 1991 – but has gone without international recognition since.

– 'Here to encourage the young' –

"I come because it's a space that really allows people from all walks of life, from ambassadors, to politicians, to artists, to thinkers; different people to just come here and share ideas about the future of Somaliland – as well as looking back at the past," said filmmaker Khadra Ali.

"We are here to encourage the young people and tell them the value of writing, whether it's books, poetry or things related to art," said author and playwright Yasmin Mohamed Kahin, whose work was exhibited at this year's fair.

Somaliland and Somalia have a long oral storytelling tradition that celebrates poets like Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame, known as Hadraawi, who is considered by some to be the Somali Shakespeare.

It was only in 1972 that the Somali language was codified by the military government of Siad Barre in an effort to strengthen national

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identity.

But armed resistance to Barre's increasingly authoritarian rule slowed the momentum of the language's formalisation.

The Somali army subsequently bombed Hargeisa, pushing Somalilanders into exile in Europe and the Gulf as well as to refugee camps in Ethiopia.

One visitor to the fair is activist Edna Adan, the 80-year-old former foreign affairs minister and wife of Somaliland's second president, Mohamed Ibrahim Egal.

Adan, who enjoys celebrity status among young people for her activism, recalled her late 1990s visit to the site where the Hargeisa cultural centre that hosts the fair now stands.

The complex, comprising a library, gallery and theatre, opened its doors in 2014.

"I couldn't walk in the streets here because the Somali soldiers had laid mines," she said.

Initial efforts to promote books and reading received a "very tepid" response, she said.

"But then it took off extraordinarily."

Adan added that every year there were more and more young people inspired to write in Somali, as well as foreign languages including Arabic and English.

– 'The value of books' –

"It introduced young people to the value of books – something they didn't know before," she said.

Jama Musse Jama, a researcher at the University of Pisa, returned from Italy in 2008 and founded the fair.

He had previously assumed that his countrymen did not read because of their strong oral tradition.

"But then I came here and I realised that was not the reason. What was missing was the raw material. There were no books circulating," said Jama.

"We forgot who we are. We forgot art, culture, music. You know, in the 40s, 50s, 60s, Somali music used to be one of the best African music scenes. Today maybe young people have no idea what Somali music is."

But Jama insists that "things have completely changed" as awareness of literature and other art forms has grown.

Photographer Huda Ali, who in 2017 published an anthology of images depicting Somaliland, agrees.

"Ten years ago they were sometimes surprised to see a girl with a camera in the street – it was something very strange to accept. But over time they changed," she said.

A delegation from Rwanda were the guests of honour at this year's event.

Rwandan artist Carole Karemra said that Somaliland, like her own country, had been buoyed by a new artistic "self confidence" after coming close to total destruction.

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Zimbabwe Economy Desperate For Election Turn-Around (Jongwe, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Fanuel Jongwe

Zimbabwean factory manager Sifelani Jabangwe is a survivor of the Mugabe years, overseeing a company that stayed in business through hyperinflation, the national currency being abandoned and an exodus of investors.

Now he hopes that next week's election will mark a turning point if the vote brings in a legitimate government that can relaunch the shattered economy after Robert Mugabe was ousted last year.

Jabangwe's company, James North Zimbabwe, is the country's largest producer of industrial protective wear and tarpaulins, specialising in protective gloves and shoes.

It has survived by exporting to neighbouring Mozambique and Malawi as well as Kenya and Rwanda, as its client base in Zimbabwe shrunk in line with the declining economy.

Today it employs 150 people – down from 400 about 15 years ago – on the Southerton industrial area in the capital Harare, where derelict buildings overgrown with grass are more common than open businesses.

“The normalisation of relations with the rest of the world is the key takeaway in these elections so that we are not seen as a pariah state any more,” Jabangwe, who is also president of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, told AFP on a tour of his factory.

“We have lost too much time with the politics. It’s now time to develop the economy.

“When the rest of the economy is functioning and everyone has money to buy what they want, we also benefit.”

– An economy ruined –

President Emmerson Mnangagwe, who is standing in the election to retain power after succeeding Mugabe last year, has vowed to re-engage with the west after years of isolation.

He has already scrapped much of the unpopular indigenisation laws that forced foreign firms to cede 51 percent stakes to locals, and he has campaigned relentlessly on a promise to revive the economy.

Under Mugabe, the seizure of white-owned farms wrecked the agriculture sector and triggered hyperinflation, with GDP nearly halving between 2000 and 2008 – the sharpest contraction of its kind in a peacetime economy.

Previously solid health and education services collapsed, millions fled abroad to seek work and poverty rates are still climbing.

Life expectancy has only just recovered to its 1985 level of 61 years.

“We have been reeling under self-inflicted economic pain by and large,” said Shingi Munyeza, a hotel investor who also owns one Mugg and Bean cafe in Harare after a second premises closed.

“These watershed elections pose a great opportunity. We have a serious challenge of getting everybody out of this mess.

“The political establishment was more focussed on retaining power.

“We hope we are crossing from the type of leadership which maintained power at the expense of the economy and the rights of its citizens.

“I am hoping the winner will win with grace and the loser will lose with dignity and that both should embrace one another.”

– Same corrupt elite –

Monday’s election comes after Mugabe, now 94, was forced to resign following a brief military takeover in November, ending his 37 years in power.

Mnangagwa, a favourite of the military, has pledged to hold a fair election and boost investor confidence, but critics say that the same corrupt elite from Mugabe’s ruling ZANU-PF party will likely still have a grip on power after the vote.

Mnangagwa faces opposition leader Nelson Chamisa of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) who has also prioritised economic growth – but Zimbabwean economist John Robertson warned that the country faced a long haul.

“The government that comes in has to relax the levels of control. There are too many uncertainties with rules being changed and lots of corruption. Businesses don’t want that,” he told AFP.

“Farmers need their property rights back so that they can use that to borrow money from banks. We did ourselves national damage and we have got to correct that.”

The World Bank describes the country’s fiscal deficit as “unsustainable” after it widened to 11.1 percent last year, and says that huge arrears to international financial institutions remain a hurdle to growth.

For Abel Kapodogo, 35, who is jobless seven years after graduating with a degree in sociology from the University of Zimbabwe, growing up under Mugabe has meant economic destitution.

“This election is a generational opportunity for us who have been failed by the ruling party,” said Kapodogo who sells fruit from a pushcart in Harare, sometimes while wearing his graduation cap and gown to protest at the lack of opportunities.

“I was expecting to have a job. It’s very painful.”

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Anglophone Rebellion Seen Raising Risk Of Civil War In Cameroon (Ntaryike, Bax, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Divine Ntaryike Jr. And Pauline Bax

Sama Jude knew it was time to flee his home town in western Cameroon when he heard the sound of gunfire ringing above the roof of the University of Buea where he's taught for four years.

As clashes between the nation's army and separatist rebels intensified, the 41-year-old lecturer packed his bags and fled to the commercial capital, Douala, about 60 kilometers (37 miles) to the east.

"You never know when you'll be hit by a bullet, maimed by a machete, arrested by government troops or kidnapped by the secessionists," he said.

Jude is among tens of thousands of people forced to flee an increasingly bloody revolt in Cameroon's English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions that risks erupting into full-blown civil war. The violence is escalating as the nation prepares to hold presidential elections in October that are likely to extend the rule of 85-year-old Paul Biya, who has been president since 1982 and is Africa's second-longest serving leader. While his government has made some concessions, analysts say talks with the separatists are needed to prevent more deaths.

The central African nation split after World War I into a French-run zone and a smaller, British-controlled area. They were unified in 1961, but the English-speaking minority, about a fifth of the population, has complained of marginalization by the French majority for decades.

In its first public report to detail the damage from the conflict, the government last month appealed to donors to fund a special humanitarian emergency plan to help 75,000 displaced people and 22,000 others who've fled the country. Separatists have killed 84 members of the security forces in at least 123 attacks since the crisis began in 2016, according to the report, a figure the Defense Ministry later put at about 120.

"This is heading straight toward civil war if nothing is done," said Hans De Marie Heungoup, a Nairobi-based analyst at the International Crisis Group. "The military has killed civilians indiscriminately and burnt dozens of villages. Militias are also increasingly targeting civilians, particularly collaborators of the government. It's getting more tense as the elections approach." More than 220 civilians have been killed in the last 10 months, he said.

Roads Blocked

Campaigning is set to begin soon, even as it's unlikely the vote can be held in areas of the Anglophone regions where regular gunfights between separatists and government troops take place. Across the main urban settlements, including Kumba, Muyuka and Limbe in Southwest, public transport is at a standstill and businesses are closed, with militias blocking major roads and setting fire to cocoa and rubber plantations.

With roads and ports that are vital for landlocked neighbors including oil-producing Chad and Central African Republic, Cameroon has the biggest economy in the central African monetary zone. Its population of 23 million depends mostly on agriculture.

The latest unrest began in late 2016 with peaceful protests by teachers and lawyers against the dominance of the French language in schools and courts. It's escalated into a conflict in which armed splinter groups are killing soldiers and police officers, kidnapping government officials and harassing village chiefs they accuse of collaborating with the authorities.

The armed groups, estimated to comprise at least 1,000 active members, are largely funded by Cameroon's diaspora, according to the ICG.

The political leadership of the Anglophone movement has been imprisoned since January. Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch have said the government's heavy-handed response contributed to an escalation of the conflict. Last week, the New York-based organization released satellite imagery showing security forces had torched dozens of villages, and accused them of committing torture and summary executions.

Social Media

In the latest incident, armed men dressed in camouflage are seen riddling two women and two small children with bullets on a dusty roadside after accusing them of supporting the Nigeria-based Islamist group Boko Haram. The video, which was widely circulated on social media, prompted the U.S. to call for an investigation into the killings. Amnesty International says it was carried out by the military.

The government has consistently denied allegations that the security forces commit abuses, saying the separatists conduct hate

campaigns on the internet and falsely accuse troops of "imaginary atrocities."

Social media platforms play a particularly toxic role in the crisis, the government said last month. Gruesome videos and photos of alleged human-rights abuses by both sides have appeared regularly on Facebook and Twitter, as have mobile-phone videos of military operations in the two regions.

"It's now at a crisis level that we haven't seen before with pictures of burnt-down villages and bodies hanging from trees circulating on social media," said Jeffrey Smith, executive director of Vanguard Africa, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that monitors elections in Africa.

While very few people supported secession when the protests began, public opinion in the Northwest and Southwest regions has shifted toward separation, according to Heungoup.

"It's impossible to resolve this crisis without involving the leadership of the Anglophone separatists, but there's no dialogue with them," Heungoup said. "The government comes across as arrogant and having no sense of accountability, and it's done no fundamental concessions. That's the problem with Biya – if two years ago he had done half of the little he's done so far, the crisis wouldn't have reached this level."

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Bemba To Return To DR Congo Aug 1 Ahead Of Polls (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Former DR Congo vice president Jean-Pierre Bemba, acquitted last month of war crimes, will return to the country on August 1 ahead of end-year elections, his party announced Monday.

"The Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC) has the signal honour to announce that it has pleased our lord God, after 10 years away, to allow the return of Senator Jean-Pierre Bemba Gomba to his country of birth, the land of his ancestors, the Democratic Republic of Congo on Wednesday, August 1," the party said in a statement.

"The MLC invites the Congolese people, especially the Kinois (Kinshasa inhabitants) to give him a warm, peaceful and enthusiastic welcome," it added.

The MLC on Friday named Bemba its candidate for planned December 23 presidential polls after the government said he could apply for a diplomatic passport to return home after he was acquitted of war crimes in The Hague.

The DRC is in the grip of a crisis over the future of President Joseph Kabila, who has ruled the country since 2001 and has remained in office despite a two-term constitutional limit that expired in December 2016.

He claims he can do this under a clause in the constitution that enables a president to stay in office until a successor is elected.

In June, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague overturned a 2016 conviction against Bemba on five counts of war crimes committed by his militia in the Central African Republic in 2002-2003.

The court said he could not be held criminally liable for atrocities the militiamen committed, which included murder, rape and looting, as he was unable to influence their conduct.

He had previously been given an 18-year term, the longest ever to be handed down by the ICC.

Bemba was earlier this week known to be in Belgium having gained an interim release from the court.

The ICC is due to issue a ruling in a separate case in which Bemba was sentenced to jail and fined 300,000 euros (\$350,000) in 2017 for bribing witnesses during his main war crimes trial.

However, he has already spent a decade behind bars, and legal experts expect him to be released definitively if this time is taken into account.

It remains unclear whether he faces any threat of prosecution if he sets foot on DRC soil, after authorities issued a warrant in 2007 against him over the violence and for alleged arson at the Supreme Court.

Kabila, who took over from his assassinated father in 2001, presides over the vast central African nation with a history of corruption, poor governance and armed conflict.

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Congo Opposition Set Demands For December Poll (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Opposition parties in the Democratic Republic of Congo on Monday called on President Joseph Kabila to step down ahead of elections in December but ruled out boycotting the poll.

In an exceptional move, five parties signed a joint statement setting out demands ahead of the December 23 presidential vote, whose outcome is crucial for the sprawling, volatile DRC.

"We are not going to boycott the elections, because we have known from the very beginning that this is the ruling party's plan, to push the opposition into boycott the elections," said Delly Sesanga, a supporter of exiled opposition leader Moise Katumbi.

The statement – issued two days before the start of a two-week registration period for presidential candidates – called for "free, democratic and transparent" elections.

It said the elections had to take place without Kabila as a candidate and without the use of electronic voting machines, which the government controversially wants to deploy.

It was signed by five parties, including the traditional mainstream opposition, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), as well as by parties led by Katumbi and Jean-Pierre Bemba, an ex-vice president and former warlord recently acquitted of war crimes by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Kabila has been at the helm of the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa since 2001, presiding over a mineral-rich country with a reputation for corruption, inequality and unrest.

He was just 29 when he took over as president from his father, Laurent-Desire Kabila, who was assassinated by a bodyguard.

Dozens of people have been killed in protests since late 2016, when Kabila was scheduled to stand down at the end of his second elected term, technically the last permitted under the constitution.

Kabila has kept power thanks to a constitutional clause enabling him to stay in office until a successor is elected.

On Thursday, Kabila delivered a state-of-the nation address that had caused wide speculation that he would announce whether he would run again, but no such big declaration was forthcoming.

The DRC has never known a peaceful transition of power since it gained independence from Belgium in 1960. Some experts fear it could spiral into wide-ranging conflict once more if the present political crisis is not resolved.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) placed the DRC 176th out of 188 countries on its Human Development Index published in March 2017.

The watchdog Transparency International ranked the country 156th out of 176 countries in its 2016 corruption index. It was ranked 154th out of 180 in the Reporters Without Borders' 2017 Press Freedom Index.

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India's Modi Arrives In Rwanda, Seeking To Promote Trade (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has arrived in Rwanda, his first stop in a tour of Africa.

Modi was welcomed in Kigali, the capital, late Monday by President Paul Kagame as the first prime minister of India to visit the East African country.

The governments of Rwanda and India later signed bilateral agreements.

Modi will also visit Uganda and then go to South Africa to attend a summit there of the BRICS emerging economies.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, who will also attend the BRICS summit, was also in Rwanda on Monday.

Both China and India have emerged as key trade partners for Africa, with China leading the way.

Modi is traveling with a substantial business delegation. He will participate in a business summit in both Rwanda and Uganda.

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In Mozambique, A Living Laboratory For Nature's Renewal (Angier, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Natalie Angier

The 14 African wild dogs were ravenous, dashing back and forth along the fence of their open-air enclosure, or boma, bouncing madly on their pogo-stick legs, tweet-yipping their distinctive wild-dog calls, and wagging their bushy, white-tipped tails like contestants on a game show desperate to be seen.

Since arriving at the park three months earlier, as they acclimated to their new setting and forged the sort of immiscible bonds that make *Lycaon pictus* one of the most social mammals in the world, the dogs had grown accustomed to a daily delivery of a freshly killed antelope to feast on.

But it had been nearly 48 hours since the pack's last meal and, hello, anybody out there?

Ah, here comes the food truck now. Paola Bouley, the park's associate director of carnivore conservation, and two of her colleagues rode up to the fence in a pickup, opened the gate, edged the vehicle just inside the boma and began lowering the carcass of a male impala.

As she stood in the back of the truck, Ms. Bouley gripped a rope tied to the antelope's rear legs, with the intention of luring the dogs from the comfort of their enclosure by slowly dragging their breakfast outside. Nice idea, but the dogs couldn't wait.

They snatched at the carcass, tried disemboweling it in midair, yanking at the rope so violently they practically pulled the extremely fit Ms. Bouley to the ground. Stop, stop! she cried.

New plan: Let's tie the rope to the pickup instead.

Again, lure and vehicle inched out through the gate, and this time the dogs followed, their coats the color of army camouflage, their ears the size of soap dishes. One, two, three, four, a baker's dozen.

The dogs bounded to freedom and fell on the impala en masse, just as the scientists hoped they would do. Except something was wrong. The dogs stopped eating. They ran around in confusion.

One dog was missing, and not just any cur: It was the top dog, the alpha female of the pack. Where was their queen?

The scientists scrambled, too.

"It's Beira — she's still inside!" Ms. Bouley called out, referring to the name chosen for the alpha female by local schoolchildren in honor of the capital city of their province.

Loping over to the assembled observers, Ms. Bouley said, "She's not coming out. She's cautious. She's always been cautious."

Now more than ever: Beira was pregnant with pups that the entire pack would help raise. There was too much commotion. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave," Ms. Bouley said.

It's tough trying to resuscitate one of Africa's most storied and biologically diverse national parks from a state of near-annihilation, the result of a brutal 16-year civil war in which an estimated one million Mozambicans were killed and a huge swath of Gorongosa's wildlife destroyed. Tough, but by no means impossible.

Thirty minutes after dispersing her guests, Ms. Bouley sent a joyful update: All pack members had left the pen, and the gate had been closed to prevent their re-entry. The dogs had polished off their last free brunch and were exploring the neighborhood, clearly eager to resume their career as team hunters par excellence.

"This is a very special time for me," said Pedro Muagura, Gorongosa's park warden. In Mozambique, he said, many families have a totem animal, and his family's is the wild dog.

Yet until the gang of 14 had been relocated from several sites in eastern South Africa as part of Gorongosa's restoration plan, the only time Mr. Muagura had encountered a wild dog was as roadkill.

"To see live dogs in my own country, to have them released into Gorongosa," he said, almost tearfully, "that is a beautiful thing."

Over the next several days, the ebullient carnivores managed to dispatch another impala and two waterbucks — beefy, handsome antelopes with bright bull's-eye markings on their rears. They are all too common in Gorongosa.

Beira's pregnant belly bulged ever more visibly, and the pack was digging her a den. Lions were no longer the only resident meat-

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eaters able to keep the burgeoning herds of grazing mammals in check.

Another apex predator, absent for decades from the park's 1,500 square miles, was back — yet more evidence that Gorongosa is on track for a great second act.

Named after a mountain on the rim of the park that in turn was named after the Mwani term for "place of danger," Gorongosa is far from the largest national park or game reserve in Africa. Kruger National Park in South Africa is five times its size. Gorongosa is not even the biggest park in Mozambique.

Yet Gorongosa stands out from the continent's many photogenic safari destinations as a kind of living laboratory, an ongoing experiment in how nature recovers from the equivalent of a massive hemorrhaging event, and which parts mend best when left to themselves and which require infusions of new blood.

Gorongosa has attracted the attention of scientists from around the world who see an opportunity to address, in real time, fundamental questions of ecology, evolution, the rise and fall and shifting distribution of species, and changes in what researchers call the landscape of fear.

The bushbuck of Gorongosa, for example, are unusually brazen about venturing away from the concealing foliage that surrounds termite mounds, where the shy, slender antelope traditionally are found. Instead, Gorongosa's bushbuck are grazing in open grassland, with all the cockiness of African buffalos or zebras.

Is that good, neutral or destructive to the local habitat — to the mix of vegetation and its microfaunal throngs, the flow of water, the cycling of nutrients, the ease with which dung beetles can put the far-flung bounty to use? And how long before the insouciant bushbuck realize that Gorongosa's predators are multiplying and headed their way?

Gorongosa is at once more and less "natural" than other game reserves in Africa. "There are no fences around Gorongosa, and that's the way a park is supposed to be," said Test Malunga, a field guide at the park.

At the same time, the park management, with the blessing of the Mozambique government, has decided to "actively encourage and promote science," said Robert Pringle, an ecologist at Princeton University who is on the Gorongosa Project's board of directors.

As a result, researchers are not confined to simple observational studies of the park's free-ranging wildlife. They can manipulate field conditions to narrow down the spurs to animal movement and foraging choices. They can dart animals to take blood samples, measure their vital signs and then outfit them with GPS collars — and for the elephants, that means necklaces big enough to girdle an oak tree.

"Many parks limit or even prohibit such activities," Dr. Pringle said. "But without them you can't have a truly science-based management strategy or definitively answer burning questions at the forefront of ecological knowledge."

Gorongosa also is preternaturally lucky to have a wealthy benefactor dedicated to the park's restoration and future.

Since 2004, Gregory C. Carr, who made a fortune in telecommunications before turning to full-time philanthropy and human rights advocacy, has spent tens of millions of dollars on the park and the 1,300 square miles of so-called buffer zone that surrounds it, where some of the poorest communities in Mozambique, and hence in the world, can be found.

Mr. Carr, 59, is genial, driven and unerringly gregarious, a kind of *L. pictus* in a baseball cap, always looking for new connections, new ideas for helping the park and its people, new ways to win over skeptics and bridge political divides. Despite recurring guerrilla skirmishes in the region, Mr. Carr said, "I think the park has done a pretty good job of being everyone's friend."

His foundation and various donors-in-arms have invested in local schools, mobile clinics, bee farms, sustainable coffee plantations, girls' clubs, and a master's program in conservation biology for Mozambican students. The classroom is Gorongosa.

"It's the only conservation biology program in the country," Mr. Carr said. "We're told it may be the only one in the world taught entirely in a national park."

Yet thorny sociocultural challenges remain. Mr. Carr is a white American with a lot of money, and though Gorongosa is a national park that belongs entirely to Mozambique, Larissa Sousa, who works in the department of human development at the park, said that many people in the region believe Mr. Carr is the owner of Gorongosa, and they've never been inside.

In fact, Gorongosa park was founded by colonial Portugal in 1960 largely for the pleasure of affluent Western adventurists, but it was quickly claimed as a national treasure when Mozambique won independence in 1975.

Behind the park's splendor, explained Piotr Naskrecki, an associate director of research at Gorongosa, is its location at the southernmost tip of Africa's Great Rift Valley, a massive geological formation that, over millions of years, has channeled huge amounts of biodiversity into Mozambique's midriff.

To the east of the rift is soft limestone, kneaded and puckered by water into caves and gorges and giving rise to riverine forests, replete with endemic bats, crickets, mollusks and millipedes that thrive on the limestone's calcium bounty.

On the western rim is hard granite and granitic soils that nurture an entirely different assemblage of life-forms, like a newly discovered species of lizard that wedges itself deep into rock cracks, beyond a predator's reach.

In the middle are the floodplains, cycling seasonally between deluge and drainage, and turning tuxedo-black with concentrated nutrients on which vegetation can bloom and herds of herbivores can fatten.

Spanning elevations from sea level to 6,000 feet at the top of Mt. Gorongosa, the park is a great mixtape of "nearly every conceivable habitat," Dr. Naskrecki said: alpine forest, montane meadow, woodland savanna, grassland, scrub forest, a touch of true rain forest.

And as you drive through it, bumping over roads so deeply rutted you feel like a human castanet, you realize you've never been so happy in your life.

In the 1980s, the music stopped. A civil war broke out, the park was shuttered, and government and rebel forces turned Gorongosa into a battlefield and makeshift abattoir.

Elephants were slaughtered for their tusks. Elands, sables, wildebeests, zebras and other large herbivores were hunted for meat or sport. Lions, leopards and hyenas were killed for being in the way, and many animals simply died of starvation.

By the time the fighting and rampant hunting ended in the mid-1990s, the park's thundering census of large mammals had been slashed by 95 percent, to numerical whimpers: 15 African buffalos here, six lions there, five zebras, a few dozen hippos and elephants. Park infrastructure had been destroyed. Only Gorongosa's bird life, some 500 species strong, survived relatively intact.

The park's wildlife began recovering, but slowly, and on visiting the park in 2003, Mr. Carr said, "I could drive around all day and not see a single animal." After consulting with a broad range of experts, Mr. Carr proposed to the Mozambican government a public-private partnership that he hoped would both hasten the recovery of Gorongosa's grandeur and lift the economy, too.

"Being an economic engine and a promoter of human rights, that's a new way to think about national parks," said Mr. Carr. "The people who live around here, this is their homeland, and they have a right to live in a decent environment that can sustain them."

The team started by restocking the larger herbivores, importing 200 buffalos and 200 wildebeests from South Africa. As the bulk grazers began trimming back the overgrown grassland, the park's array of smaller antelope species, with their twisty, calligraphic horns and their Modigliani faces, could get through to feed and more reliably breed.

The expanding prey options soon lofted the lion count, which in turn began luring back tourists for whom a lion sighting is synonymous with a safari vacation. But the lions alone could not handle the swelling ranks of herbivores and omnivores, and Gorongosa's scientists realized the park needed a more diverse guild of predators.

Where were the leopards? Leopards are the most widespread great cats in the world, yet for mysterious reasons they hadn't found their way back to Gorongosa. As a result, Gorongosa's baboons, a favorite leopard menu item, are breeding like gray squirrels, devouring everything they can get their unfastidious fingers on and moving fearlessly through the landscape.

"You don't elsewhere in Africa see baboons walking on the ground at night or sleeping on the ground," Dr. Pringle said. "But here you do."

The researchers' efforts to import leopards from elsewhere in Africa have proved legislatively challenging, and so they were thrilled when an adult male leopard, a voluntary immigrant from the buffer zone, showed up in late March and as of midsummer appeared to still be around.

The scientists admitted they have made mistakes. "We tried to introduce the cheetah," Dr. Naskrecki said, "but we learned this is not the right environment for them, and historically they have not been here."

African wild dogs, by contrast, have a history in Gorongosa and are under fewer trade restrictions, and Ms. Bouley said they will be bringing in another pack next year.

Other puzzling aspects of Gorongosa's recrudescence remain. On most African reserves, for example, waterbucks are uncommon, bit players compared to other antelope species. In Gorongosa, their numbers have exploded to 50,000.

A possible explanation: as one of the few species able to persist on the floodplain year-round, through low water and high, waterbucks may have stayed out of target range during the war and been well positioned to rebound when the shooting stopped.

The waterbuck's triumph, however, may incidentally be slowing the recovery of another water-loving mammal: the hippopotamus.

Zebras also have had a surprisingly hard time regaining their footing. Elephants have nearly rebounded to their prewar numbers, the population notably enriched in individuals that naturally lack tusks and thus were spared the selective wrath of ivory poachers.

"Gorongosa is not a Ming vase that we're trying to restore," Dr. Pringle said. "It's a dynamic ecosystem in recovery" — working like a dog and getting better all the time.

Natalie Angier became a columnist for Science Times in January 2007. She joined The Times in 1990, covering genetics, evolutionary biology, medicine and other subjects, and was awarded the 1991 Pulitzer Prize in Beat Reporting.

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NETWORK TV NEWS COVERAGE

ABC: Trump-Obama Officials' Clearance. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, lead story, 3:30, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "We're going to begin with the President and that unprecedented warning shot, that threat to strip security clearances from several former high-ranking officials in the CIA, the FBI and US intelligence. Among them, former CIA director John Brennan, former FBI Director James Comey and four former top national security and intelligence officials. Sarah Sanders today reading from a carefully scripted statement. Our Terry Moran then asking the White House, is the President threatening to punish these figures because they have been critical of the President? And what the White House then said when asked if former President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden could be next. ABC's Terry Moran leading us off from the White House." ABC (Moran) added, "An unprecedented threat from the White House podium, Press Secretary Sarah Sanders reading from a prepared statement, announcing that President Trump was preparing to strip security clearances from some of the fiercest critics of his approach to Russia." Sarah Sanders, Press Secretary: "The fact that people with security clearances are making these baseless charges provides inappropriate legitimacy to accusations with zero evidence." Moran: "Sanders mentioned six high-ranking former national security officials, including former FBI Director James Comey, former Obama National Security Adviser Susan Rice and former CIA Chief John Brennan, who blasted Trump's press conference with Vladimir Putin." John Brennan, Former CIA Chief: "I use the term that this was nothing short of treasonous, because it is a betrayal of the nation. He's giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and it needs to stop." Moran: "Brennan has even seemed to hint darkly that he knows secrets harmful to Trump, tweeting in March, 'When the full extent of your venality, moral turpitude and political corruption becomes known, you will take your rightful place as a disgraced demagogue in the dust bin of history.' All this enrages Trump. The President is threatening to punish Brennan and Comey and Clapper for saying things about him that he doesn't like. Is that presidential?" Sanders: "They've politicized and, in some cases, actually monetized their public service and their security clearances. And making baseless accusations of improper contact with Russia or being influenced with Russia against the President is extremely inappropriate. When we have further updates on that front, I'll let you know." Moran: "So their free speech he doesn't like, and he wants to punish them for it." Sanders: "Ah, no, I think you're creating your own story. The President doesn't like the fact that people are politicizing agencies and departments that are specifically meant to not be political." Moran: "Two of the people on the President's list, Comey and his former deputy Andrew McCabe, already lost their clearances awhile ago. Sanders was then asked, who's next?" Unidentified Speaker: "What about President Obama and Vice President Biden? Are they on the list, as well?" Sanders: "I'm not aware of any plans for that at this point." Moran: "The President's move today comes as he's under fire for repeatedly questioning the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attacked the 2016 election. Last week, under pressure, he tried to change course." President Donald Trump: "I accept our intelligence community's conclusion that Russia's meddling in the 2016 election took place." Moran: "But then, once again, he seemed to dismiss the idea of a Russian attack as a hoax, tweeting over the weekend, 'so, President Obama knew about Russia before the election. Why didn't he do something about it? Why didn't he tell our campaign? Because it is all a big hoax.' Sanders doing more cleanup today, insisting the President believes that Russia interfered in 2016. She says the hoax is the allegation that Trump conspired with the Kremlin."

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ABC: US-Iran Relations. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 2, 0:55, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "We're following the growing tension between the US and Iran. As you know, President Trump tore up the nuclear agreement some time back. Over the weekend, we witnessed strong words from Iran's mod rat President, warning the US that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars. But terry, as you've been reporting all day, that invoked an angry response from President Trump." ABC (Moran) added, "It did. The President tweeting at President Rouhani in all caps, 'Never, ever threaten the United States again or you will suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before, be cautious.' And then today, the Foreign Minister of Iran trolling President Trump, responding in all caps, 'Color me unimpressed.' But even more important than that, he referred to the way the President talked about North Korea, challenging President Trump's credibility on this issue."

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ABC: Toronto-Shooting. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 3, 2:15, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "We're also following new developments coming in just moments ago after that deadly mass shooting in Toronto. The death toll growing tonight, and just a short time ago, the identity of the suspect was revealed, Faisal Hussain, 29 of Toronto. It all began in a popular neighborhood, shattered by gunfire. Two people killed, including a 10-year-old girl. Police arriving, exchanging gunfire with the suspect. He was found dead nearby. And tonight, are they closer to a possible motive? They are not ruling out terror. ABC's Gio Benitez from the scene." ABC (Benitez) added, "Tonight, investigators are desperately searching for a motive behind the shooting of more than a dozen people, shattering a quiet Sunday night in Toronto." Police Dispatch: "There's multiple victims and the suspect that's fleeing looks like possibly still shooting." Benitez: "The shots broke out at around 10:00 pm in a section of Toronto known for its nightlife. Victims seen lying on the street." Unidentified Speaker: "One woman ran and she fell. He went over her and shot her twice." Chief Mark Saunders, Toronto Police Service: "As a result, two people have succumbed to their injuries. One is an 18-year-old female and another is a 10-year-old girl." Benitez: "That 18-year-old, Reese Fallon, a political volunteer who lived in Toronto. Thirteen other victims, ranging from 10 to 59 years old, being treated in local hospitals, some seriously injured. The shooter fleeing on foot, found dead just blocks from where the shootings took place. Authorities say the suspect was 29-year-old Faisal Hussain from Toronto. Toronto's city council today holding an emotional moment of silence as authorities search for answers." Mayor John Tory, Toronto: "This is an attack against innocent families and against our entire city. Why does anyone in this city need to have a gun at all?" Muir: "The mayor of Toronto there. Gio is in Toronto tonight. And officials not ruling out terror, as I mentioned. And you just got a statement from the family of the alleged shooter?" Benitez: "Yeah, that's right, David. The shooting happened right behind me here. Now, for the first time, as you say, we're hearing from the suspect's family. They say that the shooter suffered from severe mental health issues. David?"

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ABC: Severe Weather. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 4, 1:20, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "Next tonight, the real concern up and down the east coast this evening, and over the next couple of days over the potential for, quote, life-threatening floods from the rains. The flash flood watch tonight already for 35 million Americans, rain stalled along the already water logged east coast. A super soaker with damaging ones in Gainesville, Florida, and a tough morning commute in parts of Pennsylvania. And in the west tonight, we're also following the heat and the fires. More than 3,000 homes and businesses now listed as threatened by that fire burning near Yosemite. So, let's get to chief meteorologist Ginger Zee, live tonight near the George Washington Bridge here in New York. Ginger, good evening." ABC (Zee) added, "David, the National Weather Service is using that heavy wording of the potential for life-threatening flooding, because there are spots in Virginia that got more than nine inches of rain over the weekend and you're about to get another up to half foot. Let me take you to the maps where you see that abundant moisture pouring onto the east coast. Really from North Carolina to western New York. There are a couple of stationary fronts, the low coming up and the flash flood warnings in place. You can see another up to five. Let's talk about repetitive forecasts, on the west coast. Waco, Texas, for example, tied their all-time record at 112 today. And we're going for the rest of the week."

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ABC: Missouri-Duck Boat Accident. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 5, 2:00, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "We were on the scene today of that horrific duck boat accident in Branson, Missouri, just as they lifted the boat out of the water. They revealed the life jackets right there on the shelf in the boat. This question, of course, did the captain ever tell passengers to put them on as this disaster was beginning to unfold? ABC's Marcus Moore in Branson again tonight." ABC (Moore) added, "That doomed boat, back on the surface tonight. The Coast Guard raising it from the bottom of the lake. It sank in a violent storm Thursday. The boat battling winds above 60 miles per hour and six-foot swells. Seventeen dying in that terrifying disaster. Those crews lifting the boat from the water, and you can see the line of life jackets there hanging from the top canopy. Survivor Tia Coleman believes those life vests could have saved some of her nine family members, including three young children. This photo taken just before the tragedy." Tia Coleman, Survivor: "I felt like if I was able to get a life jacket, I could have saved my babies." Moore: "But she says the captain told passengers they wouldn't need the vests. Regulations require life jackets, or PFDs, to be onboard, but --" Capt. Scott Stoermer, USCG: "The decision to don those PFDs is made as an operational decision for the captain onboard." Moore: "Investigators recovering the boat's data recorder, which may provide clues to how the crew responded, and answers for grieving families." Coleman: "Since I've had a home, it's always been filled. It's always been filled with little feet and laughter and my husband. I don't know how I'm going to do it." Muir: "Marcus joins us tonight from Branson. And Marcus, the captain of the boat has been interviewed by investigators, and I'm sure they're looking for answers now about why passengers weren't wearing the life jackets. Were they, in fact, told to wear them?" Moore: "Yeah, that's right, that is the question, one of the many that investigators are looking into. That allegation that the captain did not tell passengers to put on life jackets. And David, along with whether any precautions were taken ahead of that violent storm."

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ABC: Las Vegas Massacre-MGM Suing Victims. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 6, 1:35, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "We followed the tearful press conference today, survivors of the Las Vegas massacre now speaking out, after they're now being sued by the owner of the Mandalay Bay hotel. MGM, the company that owns the hotel, suing the victims and the families of the deceased. MGM says they're not looking for money, but they want to sue to keep them from suing. Here's ABC's Will Carr." ABC (Carr) added, "Tonight, survivors in the Las Vegas massacre, the worst mass shooting in US history, calling MGM's lawsuit outrageous." Joyce Shipp, Mother Of A Shooting Victim: "It's like being kicked into the ground." Unidentified Speaker: "I've already lost my son, and now they want to sue me." Carr: "MGM filing suit against more than 1,000 victims and family members including Jason McMillan, a Sheriff's Deputy, now a paraplegic, who says the move is bringing back the worst night of his life." Jason McMillan, Former Sheriff's Deputy: "I couldn't help anybody." Carr: "MGM owns Mandalay Bay, where Stephen Paddock carried out his deadly rampage, killing 58. The hotel attempting to use an obscure post 9/11 law, for acts of terror that could shield them. In a statement MGM saying, 'We are not asking for money or attorney's fees', but that they are seeking a preemptive ruling to not be held liable against people who may sue. Victims vowing to fight this new legal attack." McMillan: "Hearing that I'm being sued is not only insulting, it enrages me." Carr: "David, an attorney for the victims says suing the men and women who were either shot or lost loved ones is about as un-American as it gets."

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ABC: Los Angeles-Trader Joe's Shooting. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 7, 0:30, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "Next tonight here, the investigation into that deadly shootout that ended at a Los Angeles Trader Joe's. Police are searching for witnesses tonight. The supermarket the end of a rampage that began as a family dispute. A suspect taking hostages, trading gunshots with police. People escaping, running for their lives. We watched at some of them climbed from windows. 28-year-old Gene Atkins turned himself in after three hours, but the store manager had already been killed."

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ABC: Houston-Manhunt For Doctor's Killer. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 8, 1:15, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "From Texas tonight, there is new surveillance just released this evening in the search for the killer of a well-known doctor in Houston who used to treat former President George HW Bush. Police releasing a sketch of the suspect. And here's ABC's Clayton Sandell tonight." ABC (Sandell) added, "Tonight, an urgent search for clues. Houston police say they're pouring over hundreds of hours of surveillance video, hunting for any leads in the mysterious murder of a prominent cardiologist. These grainy images show doctor Mark Hausknecht in green, riding his bike to work. It's just before 9:00 am Friday morning. Broad daylight, a busy intersection. The suspect in red, riding just behind." Asst. Chief Troy Finner, Houston PD: "The suspect drove past the doctor, turned and fired two shots. The doctor immediately went down." Sandell: "Moments later, the gunman flees on a mountain bike. Police released this sketch, the suspect described as a white or Hispanic man in his 30s." Dr. Alpesh Shah, Associate Professor, Houston Methodist Hospital: "I would not associate this place with any sort of crime. Or such a heinous crime." Sandell: "Hausknecht was 65. His patients included the President, George HW Bush, who said, 'I will always be grateful for his exceptional, compassionate care.' And right now, police say they do not know who this suspect is, and they do not have a motive."

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ABC: Trump-DOJ Investigation-Cohen Recordings. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 9, 0:50, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "To developing headline involving Michael Cohen tonight. Friday night we reported Cohen taped then-candidate Trump. Well, tonight, we have now learned of 11 more audio recordings seized in those FBI raids. They've now been released to federal prosecutors. Sources tell ABC News tonight that it appears that none of those 11 recordings involve the President."

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ABC: Trump-DOJ Investigation-Manafort's Trial. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 10, 0:20, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "And a delay for the first trial to be brought by the special counsel. A judge moving today the Virginia trial of Paul Manafort from this week to next Tuesday now, and allowing the prosecutor to call five witnesses who will testify under a grant of immunity. Manafort faces charges of money laundering and fraud."

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ABC: Miami-Demolition Accident. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 11, 0:15, Muir, 8.39M) reported, "To the index of other news this Monday night. The demolition accident in Miami Beach. The building coming down, debris flying into the street. The building was scheduled for a controlled demolition. Something happened, sending the entire building down at once. The mayor says, quote, something went terribly wrong."

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ABC: Uber And Lyft-Livestream Passengers-Controversy. ABC World News Tonight (7/23, story 12, 0:15, Muir, 8.39M) reported, “That Uber and Lyft driver causing an uproar has now been fired in St. Louis tonight. Jason Gargac, secretly livestreaming video of hundreds of passengers. Authorities say recording is legal in Missouri, a one-party state, but can you stream it? The driver claims he had a small sign warning passengers.”

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CBS: Severe Weather. The CBS Evening News (7/23, lead story, 1:35, Glor, 5.61M) reported, “We’ll begin with extreme, potentially dangerous weather affecting big portions of the country this week. Excessive heat warnings are up across the west. The areas you see here in red and orange. Temperatures today reached 111 in wake York Texas, 112 in phoenix, Arizona, and 119 in palm springs, California. It is expected to be even hotter tomorrow. The heat is making the battle against California wildfires all the more difficult. In the east, flood watches and warnings are up from the carolinas all the way to New York state. Flooding has already hit Pennsylvania, swamping streets. Some did have to be rescued from their homes. Tony Dokoupil is in Lebanon, PA tonight. Tony?” CBS (Dokoupil) added, “Well, Jeff, what a weekend and what a Monday. A powerful coastal storm has been pounding the northeast and the mid atlantic, bringing absolute downpours like this one. Now that storm is stalled, lashing Pennsylvania and New York with rain like you’re seeing here. In nearby sckukyll county, roads turned into rivers and first responders had the driveinto action, making several rescues. In some areas the floodwater rose so quickly, it nearly went above the roof of cars, forcing stalled drivers on to their own hoods in search of higher ground. There is no expecttation that this is going to let up any time soon. It follows a weekend of absolute downpours. According to the National Weather Service, this is going to continue, this stalled heavy rain pattern, throughout the northeast through mid-week or even the end of the week. Jeff? No let-up in sight.”

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CBS: Extreme Heat. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 2, 1:50, Glor, 5.61M) reported, “We’ll move now to the heat and wildfires in the west. Jamie Yuccas is there.” CBS (Yuccas) added, “This massive wildfire keeps raging in the California Sierra, threatening hundreds of homes and burning dangerously close to Yosemite National Park. More than 3,000 firefighters are not just battling winds, but now extreme heat. Temperatures on the fire lines are soaring to well over 100 degrees. It is just the beginning of heat wave that could bring the summer’s hottest temperatures so far to southern California and Arizona. One hundred and twenty degrees for Palm Springs. Phoenix today could smash its record of 114. By tomorrow, it could hit 117. Even those who take precautions can quickly become victims. Arizona officials reported several rescues of hikers overcome by heat.” Unidentified Speaker: “Occasionally you get somebody out here who doesn’t know what they were in for.” Yuccas: “Is that what happened this weekend?” Unidentified Speaker: “That’s frequently what happened.” Yuccas: “In fact, heat-related illnesses last year killed more than 150 people in the Phoenix area. Can you talk about what it feels like on your body just to have it this hot?” Unidentified Speaker: “It’s something that you can prepare for. I don’t know if you ever get used to it.” Yuccas: “Brutally hot temperatures could also impact flights coming in and out of Phoenix. Some commercial planes are not certified to fly if the mercury tops 123 degrees. A similar heat wave last year grounded dozens of flights. Where I’m located in phoenix, it is currently 114 degrees. But if you take a look at somewhere like the asphalt with the thermometer, you’re at close to 150. The car dashboard, close to 1140. And, Jeff, there is little relief in the overnight hours. By 9:00 am tomorrow, it will be back in the triple digits in Phoenix.”

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CBS: Heat Wave Across The World. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 3, 0:30, Glor, 5.61M) reported, “The weather extremes do extend far beyond the United States. The temperature in Japan just west of Tokyo hit 106 today. That is the highest temperature ever recorded in Japan. A heat wave there is blamed for at least 44 deaths. Heat wave in Sweden inside the arctic circle is feeding dozens of wildfires. One of the worst outbreaks the country has ever seen. Strong winds are fanning wildfires in Greece, including two major fires near Athens. At least two have been killed.”

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CBS: Trump-Obama Officials’ Clearance. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 4, 2:10, Reid, 5.61M) reported, “We move now to a political firestorm in Washington. The White House says the President is looking into revoking the security clearances of a number of former national security officials who served during the Obama era. All have been very critical of President Trump. Here’s Paula Reid.” CBS (Reid) added, “President Trump may strip security clearances from some of his most outspoken detractors, among them former FBI Director James Comey, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former NSA Director Michael Hayden. He’s also targeting John Brennan, who recently blasted the President over his summit with Vladimir Putin.” John Brennan, Former CIA Director: “Nothing short of treasonous.” Reid: “Mr. Trump has publicly accused these former officials of publicly spreading information from the ongoing special counsel investigation into Russian meddling in the US election. Last week, the President called them out.” Glor: “Do you think any US intelligence agencies are out the get you?” President Donald Trump:

"Well certainly in the past it's been terrible. You look at Brennan. You look at Clapper. You look at Hayden. You look at Comey. You look at McCabe. You look at Strzok and his lover, Lisa Page. You look at other people in the FBI who have been fired no longer there." Reid: "It is common for government officials to maintain high-level security clearances after they leave office. Clearances are renewed every five years and allow former officials to advise their successors. A security expert, Frank Cilluffo, says the public could be hurt if the information isn't shared." Frank Cilluffo, Director, Center For Cyber And Homeland Security: "Ultimately it's the American people, because we're not going to be able to get the requisite knowledge that these individuals have in their heads to be able to enhance our national security." Glor: "Paul, I think some people might be surprised to hear that some of these officials maintain clearances. Why do some government officials believe it's important for them to maintain those clearances?" Reid: "Well, they tell me it's actually the government that benefits, not only does the government benefit from the expertise of these former officials, but they also need people in the private sector and outside of government who they can communicate with, especially when it comes to national security threats."

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CBS: US-Iran Relations. The [CBS Evening News](#) (7/23, story 5, 2:10, Jiang, 5.61M) reported, "Iran fired a verbal salvo at the United States over the weekend. And President Trump fired right back. It began when Iran's President warned that the war with his country, a war, would be the mother of all wars. More now from Weijia Jiang, also at the White House." CBS (Jiang) added, Unidentified Speaker: "Mr. President, any concerns about provoking tensions with Iran?" President Donald Trump: "Not at all." Jiang: "President Trump this afternoon downplayed the escalation intention between Washington and Tehran. The comments came after his tweet late yesterday, addressing President Rouhani. 'Never ever threaten the United States again,' he wrote, 'or you will suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before.' The President was responding to remarks from Rouhani earlier that day. 'America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars.' Rouhani's government has been under pressure as Iran's economy struggles. It is bracing for additional US sanctions to take effect in two weeks, a consequence of President Trump's withdrawal from the Obama-era nuclear deal in May." Trump: "The United States no longer makes empty threats." Jiang: "The Trump administration has taken a hard line with Iran, especially since the arrival of John Bolton as National Security Adviser and the elevation of Mike Pompeo to Secretary of State." Mike Pompeo, Secretary Of State: "I think everyone can agree that the regime in Iran has been a nightmare for the Iranian people." Jiang: "Iran's leader blasted Pompeo for interfering in state matters, but Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said regime change is not the goal." Sarah Sanders, Press Secretary: "Again, our focus is on stopping Iran from having nuclear weapons regardless of who is there. That's what our priority is." Jiang: "We have seen explosive exchanges before with North Korea. It eventually led the dialogue, but the White House would not answer what it will take to have direct negotiations between presidents Trump and Rouhani. One strategy to apply pressure, though, Jeff, we just saw with Secretary Pompeo is to appeal directly to the Iranian people."

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CBS: New Secretary Of Veterans Affairs Confirmed. The [CBS Evening News](#) (7/23, story 6, 0:10, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "Also in DC today, the Senate voted 86-9 to confirm Robert Wilkie as Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Wilkie is 55 years old. He served as assistant Secretary of Defense under President George W. Bush."

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CBS: Missouri-Duck Boat Accident. The [CBS Evening News](#) (7/23, story 7, 1:50, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "We turn now to the tour boat tragedy in Missouri. Today the boat was turned over the federal investigators. One issue being looked at is whether the operators violated Coast Guard rules by setting off as thunderstorms rolled in. Omar Villafranca is at Table Rock Lake near Branson." CBS (Villafranca) added, "Divers at Table Rock Lake only needed a few hours to lift a submerged duck boat out of 80 feet of water. Four days after a storm sank the boat and killed 17 people on board." Unidentified Speaker: "Oh, no." Unidentified Speaker: "It's going under." Loren Smith, Survivor: "I saw someone struggling. I went to push up their feet so they could get help, but the waves were too big. I couldn't get them." Villafranca: "Loren Smith was one of 14 survivors pulled from the water, but her brother and father didn't make it." Unidentified Speaker: "Oh, my gosh." Villafranca: "Smith says the captain never told the passengers to start taking safety precautions." Smith: "Water started flooding in the boat right before it sank. Everybody was in shock. The guy didn't tell us to put on life jackets. The selfish side of me is like, why did he get to live and not my brother." Tia Coleman, Survivor: "I never want to be on any boat ever again in my life." Villafranca: "Tia Coleman also survived but lost her three children, her husband, and five other relatives when the boat went under." Coleman: "If I was able to get a life jacket, I could have saved my babies, because they could have floated up to the top and somebody could have grabbed them. And I wasn't able to do that." Villafranca: "Now that the duck boat is out of the water, regular lake activities have resumed. We also learned that the Missouri Highway Patrol is conducting their own separate investigation into possible criminal negligence, but so far no charges have been filed."

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CBS: Central America-Nicaragua Civil War. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 8, 2:20, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "We are following a very bad situation in Central America tonight. New protests today are raising fears of a civil war in Nicaragua that could worsen the immigration crisis here in the US. Hundreds have been killed in demonstrations since the government tried to cut social security benefits three months ago. Protesters are demanding President Daniel Ortega step down. He has ruled Nicaragua for 22 of the last 40 years. Manuel Bojorquez is the only network correspondent tonight in Nicaragua." CBS (Bojorquez) added, "This is the latest anti-government March. It is packed here. It has shut down one of the main thoroughfares of the capital city, Managua. You can see all the people gathered here. Many of them have covered their faces out of fear that they will be targeted for being part of this protest. But being here is a risk they are willing to take. This masked young man has been protesting for months now. How long does this go? 'Until he's gone. This sign says, Nicaragua needs a President. I am armed, but only with strength and courage. The Ortega regime accuses the protesters of inciting violence, which has taken the lives of national police, who claim they were simply trying to restore the peace. It's believed paramilitary forces loyal to Ortega fired into a Catholic church earlier this month as 100 university students sought shelter. Two were killed. Father Eric Verada was there during the 15-hour siege. Tell us, if you can, what happened that day. The worst day of your life. He showed us where the bullets pierced the church's icons. Jesus is with you, no matter how bad it gets. Even as this protest unfolded, supporters of Ortega regime were holding a demonstration of their own, an indication of the deep political divisions of the country, and a sign that turmoil may not be ending any time soon."

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CBS: Florida-Protests Over Stand Your Ground. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 9, 2:20, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "A dispute over parking space led to an argument, a fatal shooting, and now a lot more talk about Stand Your Ground laws. Meg Oliver is in Clearwater, Florida." CBS (Oliver) added, Britany Jacobs, Girlfriend: "We did everything together, you know. It's tough." Oliver: "Britany Jacobs is still hurting. The shooting happened last Thursday in this convenience store parking lot. The family of five parked in a handicapped spot. 28-year-old Markeis McGlockton and his five-year-old son went inside. That's when 47-year-old Michael Drejka confronted her." Jacobs: "He was just harassing me about our parking space, you know, about handicapped parking space." Oliver: "McGlockton returned and shoved Drejka to the ground. That's when Drejka drew his gun and fired a single shot into McGlockton's chest. He stumbled back in the store and collapsed in front of his son. A day later the Pinellas County Sheriff declared he could not charge Drejka. Criminal defense attorney Anthony Rickman says the fact that McGlockton backed up after the shove raises concerns." Criminal Defense Attorney Anthony Rickman: "The question is, at that point in time, was there the possibility of imminent serious body injury or death of Drejka that justified the use of deadly force? Watching that video, I don't think so." Oliver: "At least 23 other states also have so-called Stand Your Ground law, allowing them to use deadly force against an attacker. They all say victims have no duty to retreat. Jacobs is left trying to comprehend how her three children lost their father over a trip to buy snacks." Jacobs: "Because all my man was trying to do is protect his girl, like anybody else would, stand by, you know, his family's side." Oliver: "The case is not over. It's now up to Florida's state attorney to determine whether to seek a grand jury indictment."

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CBS: Toronto-Shooting. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 10, 0:20, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "Toronto's police chief said today it is too soon to know the motive behind last night's mass shooting. Terrorism has not been ruled out. Cell phone video captured a man firing into restaurants. A ten-year-old girl and an 18-year-old woman were killed. Thirteen others were hurt. The gunman identified as Faisal Hussain was killed in a shoot-out with police."

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CBS: Syria-Israeli Troops Evacuate War Zone Workers. The CBS Evening News (7/23, story 11, 0:20, Glor, 5.61M) reported, "More than 400 members of Syria's white helmets and their families were evacuated overnight by Israeli forces. Hundreds of others remain trapped inside Syria. The white helmets are first responders credited with rescuing more than 100,000 Syrians wounded in air strikes and bombings. The Assad regime considers them terrorists and condemned Israel's role in evacuating them."

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NBC: Trump-Obama Officials' Clearance. NBC Nightly News (7/23, lead story, 2:50, Jackson, 7.55M) reported, "The White House is taking aim at several top level national security officials. Officials who have been publicly critical of the President. Threatening to yank their security clearances. The list includes former CIA Director John Brennan, who minced no words in his criticism of President Trump at the Helsinki summit. The White House accusing Brennan and five others of politicizing their high-level access. Stripping them of clearances could be seen as an act of political retaliation by the President against his critics. Our chief white house correspondent Hallie Jackson has details." NBC (Jackson) added, "It's an unprecedented threat aimed at critics of the Commander-in-Chief. The White House considering stripping the security clearances of six former intelligence officials." Sarah Sanders, Press Secretary: "They politicized and in some cases monetized their public service and security clearances." Jackson:

"Most of the officials worked for both Democrats and Republicans and have been tough on President Trump publicly. Isn't the President doing exactly what you just said the President doesn't want all these people doing?" **Sanders**: "No, the President isn't making baseless accusations of improper contact with a foreign government and accusing the President of the United States of treasonous activity." **Jackson**: "That may be a reference to John Brennan, former CIA Director and Senior National Security and Intelligence Analyst. He called last week's meeting with Vladimir Putin nothing short of treasonous." **John Brennan**, Former CIA Director : "I equate it to the betrayal of one's nation. Basically aiding and abetting, giving comfort to an enemy." **Jackson**: "He's on a list that includes former FBI officials James Comey and Andrew McCabe. Neither pf whom currently have security clearances because they were fired. Michael Hayden former CIA Director said the threat won't have any effect on what I say or write. Former Obama National Security Adviser Susan Rice, silent for now." **Michael Hayden**, Former CIA Director: "I think this is just a very, very petty, petty thing to do." **Jackson**: "Former intelligence leaders typically keep their clearances so they can talk about sensitive matters with their successors." **Unidentified Speaker**: "A security clearance is very valuable for former officials in a private sector so to lose one could amount in a financial penalty." **Jackson**: "The President is not usually personally involved in decisions to revoke the clearance. To critics, it's political punishment." **Unidentified Speaker**: "It concerns me greatly if this White House breaks precedent in trying to attack former members of the intelligence community because they simply express their views and first amendment rights." **Jackson**: "John Brennan tonight, by the way, declined to comment. The Press Secretary is not commenting on another story making headlines out of Washington. The trial of former Trump campaign chair Paul Manafort. Jury selection was supposed to start Wednesday, but that's been delayed by about a week to give defense attorneys time to review new evidence."

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NBC: US-Iran Relations. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 2, 2:00, Welker, 7.55M) reported, "A dramatic escalation of the war of words between the US and Iran. President Trump taking to Twitter and telling Iran never to threaten the US again after Iran's President warned the US of the quote, mother of all wars. NBC news White House correspondent Kristen Welker has the story." **NBC (Welker)** added, "It's the Twitter take-down heard 'round the world. Mr. Trump tweeting to the Iranian President Rouhani, never ever threaten the United States again or you will suffer consequences. The likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before. We are no longer a country that will stand for your demented words of violence and death. Be cautious.' Today the President pressed on his aggressive approach. " **Unidentified Speaker**: "Mr. President, any concern about provoking tensions with Iran?" **President Donald Trump**: "None at all." **Welker**: "The hard core warning seemed to be prompted by Iran's President who threatened America should know peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars. The President's tough tone highly coordinated with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launching his own harsh attack." **Mike Pompeo**, Secretary Of State: "Iran is run by something that resembles the mafia more than the government" **Welker**: "The Trump administration is poised to repose harsh sanctions suspended under the Iran Nuclear Deal. Mr. Trump pulled out of the Obama agreement in May. They say the President is using a maximum pressure campaign to get Iran to abandoned nuclear ambitions, similar to the strategy with North Korea." **Trump**: "Fire and fury like the world has never seen." **Welker**: "Experts say war is unlikely, but could there be a change at the top?" **Adm. James Stavridis**, Chief International Security And Diplomacy Analyst: "More likely he is trying to push the Iranians and get the people of Iran to be more concerned about their leadership." **Welker**: "Press Secretary Sarah Sanders sidestepped a question about regime change and said the key focus is stopping Iran from having nuclear weapons no matter what is in charge."

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NBC: Toronto-Shooting. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 3, 2:20, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "To the mass shooting mystery in Toronto. Fifteen people shot, two of them killed including a 10-year-old girl when a gunman dressed in black suddenly began shooting on a busy street. Police identified that accused gunman late today. A city in shock, many people are asking why. NBC's Gabe Gutierrez has more on the search for answers." **NBC (Gutierrez)** added, "Tonight, Toronto's Greek town, one of Canada's most popular neighborhoods, is shut down." **Toronto Transit Enforcement Unit**: "Apparently multiple shootings in the area at Danforth." **Gutierrez**: "Police swarming the scene after gunshots ripped through Danforth Avenue." **Unidentified Speaker**: "I heard at least 20 shots, clippings spent, reloading, clippings spent, reloading. That's what I heard, and then I saw the carnage as I ran down the street." **Gutierrez**: "The gunman dressed in all black, seen on this chilling video posted on social media." **Unidentified Speaker**: "One woman run and she fell, and he went over her and shot her twice, point blank." **Gutierrez**: "Carrying a shoulder bag, he stops and pulls out a handgun and opens fire, shooting 15 people." **Unidentified Speaker**: "So he had a calm about him, that I can say and he started shooting right past us." **Gutierrez**: "Did you think you would make it out?" **Jody Steinhower**, Eyewitness: "You know, I don't think we had time to think." **Gutierrez**: "Jody Steinhower was inside one of the restaurants nearby with her family celebrating her birthday." **Steinhower**: "Thank goodness my birthday cake was ten minutes late because if we had finished ten minutes earlier, we would have walked out of the restaurant where the shooter was." **Gutierrez**: "The 29-year-old gunman from Toronto, identified as Faisal Hussain, died after a shootout with police." **Terry Browne**, Toronto Police Detective Sergeant: "Again, I can't speak to what was in this individual's mind." **Gutierrez**: "Traditionally gun violence is rare in Canada, but in Toronto, there is a

recent spike with violent shootings more than doubling in the past three years." John Tory, Toronto Mayor: "I said for some time the city has a gun problem, and guns are far too readily available to far too many people." Gutierrez: "This time among the dead 18-year-old Reese Fallon and a 10-year-old girl. The reason behind the rampage is a mystery. US law enforcement sources tell NBC news the gunman was not on any watch lists. For a motive, investigators are not ruling out terrorism. Late today, the gunman's family said he struggled with psychosis and depression his entire life."

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NBC: Severe Weather. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 4, 1:15, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "Now to the dangerous weather hitting from coast-to-coast including flash floods in parts of eastern Pennsylvania, roads looking like rivers and high-water rescues happening and the threat continues for several days and in the west, triple digit heat. Al Roker on the road in Maine now monitoring it for us. Al, what is it looking like?" NBC (Roker) added, "Well, Lester, we're talking first about the rain and while we got a little break here, we're basically looking at rain stretching along the I-95 corridor from New England down into the Gulf Coast, heavy rain. Right now 37 million people at risk for a flash flood with downpours causing sudden floods, heavy rain and saturated soil a real mess. You can see a moderate risk of flooding tomorrow stretching from Pennsylvania down into Virginia. As this system moves out, it's going to take its own sweet time. We're not looking at any rainfall movement from this thing. Two to four inches per hour before it's all over and the heat out west, we've got heat stretching all the way from the pacific northwest into the gulf coast for 67 million people. Records are possible tomorrow from Texas all the way into California. We'll be watching this very closely, Lester. It will be going into the beginning of next week."

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NBC: Missouri-Duck Boat Accident. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 5, 1:45, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "A somber scene in Missouri today as the sunken duck boat that claimed 17 lives last week was raised from the water. While the victims' families struggle to cope with the loss, troubling questions persist of about whether the boat was fit to be on the water and potentially missed warnings. NBC's Ron Mott has the latest." NBC (Mott) added, "The sunken duck boat that was a water logged tomb for 17 who died here was pulled to the surface. Whether it holds clues remains to be seen, but now an inspector hired by Ripley Entertainment, the boat's owner, is speaking out about the red flags he reported last summer." Steven Paul, Inspector: "One issue is the canape on the ducks, as well as curtains that come down the sides, when the curtains are down, there is no way for people to escape." Mott: "Steven Paul says his inspection report questioned the sea worthiness of the boat's design, especially when the roll up window curtains are down and locked closed, raising concerns about escaping in an emergency." Paul: "There is escape from the back. If you can imagine being in a sinking ship with one exit, it would be devastating." Mott: "He says people trying to get out can be pushed into the canape by rushing water and trapped. Ripley Entertainment as not responded about the report." Tia Coleman, Survivor: "If I was able to get a life jacket, I could have saved my babies." Mott: "Today, life jackets could be seen dangling from the roof. The captain told them they weren't needed." Coleman: "They could have at least floated up to the top and somebody could have grabbed them, and I wasn't able to do that." Mott: "In all, nine members of the Coleman family from Indiana, pictured here just before boarding, died. Seventeen lives lost in what many are saying was a preventable accident."

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NBC: Las Vegas Massacre-MGM Suing Victims. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 6, 1:55, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "Speaking out today, survivors and victims family members who are outraged of being sued by MGM over the Las Vegas massacre. MGM owns the Mandalay Bay hotel where a gunman opened fire from the 32nd floor on to music festival. The company is suing in a bid to avoid liability. NBC's Joe Fryer has the story." NBC (Fryer) added, "They were victims during the Las Vegas shooting last year." Jason McMillan, Victim: "I couldn't help anybody." Fryer: "Now they feel like they are victims again because they are being sued." McMillan: "It brings it all up again, and takes me right back to being helpless." Fryer: "Facing hundreds of civil lawsuits, MGM resorts, owner of the Mandalay Bay, has sued the victims back. Today at an emotional news conference, survivors and relatives of those who died expressed outrage." Joyce Shipp, Mother Of Victim: "Who does that? You know, it's like being kicked again to the ground." Fryer: "MGM is not asking for money from the victims but does want a federal court to hear the cases. The company says under federal law, it's immune from financial reliability because it relied on a security firm certified by the Department of Homeland Security, and the injuries resulted from an act of terrorism, though the federal government never declared it as such. MGM says, 'We grieve with the victims, no one wins from endless litigation, adding it's looking for 'the best and fastest way to resolve these case'. Victims say MGM didn't do enough to prevent the attack. Steven Paddock stockpiled his arsenal over six days, bringing over 20 suitcases to his suite. He killed 58 people, including Hannah Ahlers." Brian Ahlers, Husband Of Victim: "I saw my wife laying flat on her back, and I laid down, you know, face down on top of her. And that's where I laid for the entire shooting – the entire attack." Fryer: "The impact of that night still felt strongly today."

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NBC: Uber And Lyft-Livestream Passengers-Controversy. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 7, 1:45, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "Now to the new questions about who is watching you when you hop in a ride share like Uber or Lyft. Both companies fired a St. Louis driver who recorded passengers in his car and live streamed their lives online for anyone to see. The passengers unaware they were being broadcast live on the web. Here is NBC's Stephanie Gosk with more." NBC (Gosk) added, "Personal conversations, embarrassing behavior, names and images of passengers' homes were streamed live on the internet by this St. Louis driver." Jason Gargac, Fired Driver: "Yeah, we need some content. We haven't really had content. It's been a couple weeks since we had good content." Gosk: "Nobody knew the video was going online, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch." Erin Heffernan, St. Louis Post-Dispatch Reporter: "The riders that I spoke to were shocked they were on camera. They had no idea and a lot of them felt violated." Gosk: "Jason Gargac, who worked for both Uber and Lyft, drove hundreds of people since March, reports the paper. Here he is half heartily promising not to show people's houses." Gargac: "I'll probably forget half the time, but I like to pretend like I remember." Gosk: "Both Lyft and Uber dumped him after the story was published. He did not return NBC's request for comment. He told the paper he sees nothing wrong with what he did, and he may not have broken the law. In 39 states and DC, conversations can be legally recorded with consent of just one person involved." Ari Ezra Waldman, New York Law School Professor: "Some of the laws written in a time when wiretapping was new, which is in the early 20th century." Gosk: "Do states need to look at the laws and potentially update them?" Waldman: "States do not just need to look at recording laws. They need to look at all privacy laws." Gosk: "Especially now when a simple ride home can end up online for the whole world to see."

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NBC: Florida-Protests Over Stand Your Ground. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 8, 1:55, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "We're back with the uproar over a deadly confrontation in a convenience store parking lot. A father fatally shot in front of his family and the incident caught on camera. The shooter is currently not facing charges under Florida's controversial Stand Your Ground law. NBC's Tammy Leitner is there." NBC (Leitner) added, "In this surveillance video, an argument over a handicap parking spot turned deadly." Britany Jacobs, Girlfriend: "He was trying to protect us." Leitner: "28-year-old Markeis McGlockton, who is black, went into the store to buy snacks for his kids. That's when Michael Drejka, who's white, confronted the McGlockton's girlfriend Britany Jacobs while she sat in the car. McGlockton came to her defense, and shoved Drejka to the ground. Drejka then pulled a gun and shot the unarmed father of three." Bob Gualtieri, Pinellas County Sheriff: "He felt after being slammed to the ground, that the next thing was he was going to be further attacked." Leitner: "Drejka, who has a permit to carry a concealed weapon, was not arrested or charged because of Florida's controversial Stand Your Ground law, which gives people in Florida the right to protect themselves using deadly force." Daniel Goldman, Legal Analyst: "If this were to happen in a state that did not have Stand Your Ground laws, I believe the shooter would have – would already be arrested and would be going to trial for murder." Leitner: "Stand Your Ground become part of the national conversation after George Zimmerman killed an unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012. Zimmerman was acquitted of murder. As protesters demand action, friends and family grieve." Michael McGlockton, Father: "I clearly don't think it's right that you can literally gun someone down, ten hours later you walking the street. It's not right." Leitner: "The video now in the hands of the state's attorney's office to determine if the controversial law in this case will stand."

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NBC: Miami-Demolition Accident. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 9, 0:15, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "A sudden collapse caught on camera in Miami beach where a 12-story condo building set to be demolished instead came tumbling down. One person was critically injured. The debris raining down onto the street. Investigators trying to figure out what triggered the accident."

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NBC: Ritz Crackers Recalled. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 10, 0:20, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "A recall tonight involving a snack in a lot of American homes. Sixteen varieties of Ritz crackers being recalled for the potential risk of salmonella in the whey powder. No illnesses have been reported. We put the full list on Facebook."

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NBC: Chick-fil-a-Meal Kits To Go. NBC Nightly News (7/23, story 11, 0:15, Holt, 7.55M) reported, "One fast food chain wants to change the way your family eats dinner. Chick-fil-A is taking on the likes of Blue Apron and Amazon by testing out meal kits to go at dozens of locations with ingredients for dishes not on the usual menu, like chicken Parmesan and enchiladas."

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SECRETARY OF STATE

Trump Stokes Iran Tensions With Threats Of Dire Consequences For Tehran (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Tension between the United States and Iran escalated Monday after President Trump appeared to threaten military action in a bellicose tweet and Iranian officials vowed to resist any attempt to destabilize their country.

The president issued his warning in an all-caps, late-night tweet to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Sunday, renewing speculation about a direct confrontation between the Trump administration and its chief adversary in the Middle East.

"NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE," Trump told the Iranian leader. ". . . BE CAUTIOUS!"

The president's threat came after Rouhani said earlier Sunday that war with Iran would be "the mother of all wars" and suggested that Tehran might flex its military might in Middle Eastern waterways that are crucial to global commerce.

Trump's message exposed the disjointed nature of his administration's strategy on Iran, as officials across the government continue to put economic and political pressure on Tehran despite the president's sudden hint at a military strike.

Despite putting Iran "on notice" in the earliest days of Trump's presidency, U.S. officials have shunned military moves that might bring an unwanted escalation and instead have opposed the international Iran nuclear deal and embraced a growing web of sanctions.

That indirect approach has so far failed to halt Iran's ballistic missile program or check its support for proxy groups across the Middle East.

"There's a huge gap between the objectives that have been laid out and the means the administration has so far been willing to employ," said former envoy Dennis Ross, who has

advised Republican and Democratic presidents on the Middle East. "At some point, either you revise the objectives or you embrace new means."

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded to Trump on Monday afternoon, tweeting that Iran was "UNIMPRESSED" by the president's threat.

"The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them —albeit more civilized ones—for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia," he said.

White House officials said Trump's message to Iranian leaders was in keeping with his tough stance.

"The president's been, I think, pretty strong since Day One in his language towards Iran," press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters Monday. "He's going to continue to focus on the safety and security of [the] American people."

National security adviser John Bolton suggested in a statement issued Monday that Trump's tweet might have been planned or at least contemplated for a while.

"I spoke to the president over the last several days, and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before," said Bolton, who has advocated regime change in Iran in the past.

Trump's tweet followed a familiar pattern: When mired in an especially negative situation, change the subject.

So a week after his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which was heavily criticized by Democratic and Republican leaders, and after waffling over his faith in U.S. intelligence agencies, Trump took to Twitter to issue an all-caps bulletin to Iran.

"There's nothing going on here except he wants to change the subject," said one Trump adviser, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to offer a candid assessment.

The adviser noted that Iran's leaders have uttered similar "mother of all wars" taunts over the years and that little has substantively changed in recent days to indicate a real escalation of tensions.

Asked Monday if he had any concerns about stoking tensions with Iran, Trump told reporters, "None at all."

The most recent war of words comes 2½ months after Trump set aside the concerns of America's closest allies and pulled out of the nuclear deal with Iran on May 8, deeming the pact "an embarrassment."

Since then, teams of U.S. officials have fanned out across Europe and Asia, warning companies to stop importing Iranian oil and to sever other types of business ties with Iran.

The Trump administration is also seeking to impose new financial costs on Iran, imposing sanctions on top officials and individuals associated with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

A fresh round of sanctions targeting the Iranian automotive industry and key metals will go into effect Aug. 4, the State Department has said. Sanctions targeting Iran's energy and banking sectors are due to be instituted Nov. 4.

The United States is also intensifying efforts to reach Iranians directly. Speaking to Iranian Americans in California on Sunday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the U.S. government would expand broadcasts in Farsi and take steps to bypass Internet censorship in Iran.

Mark Dubowitz, who heads the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said the administration's harsh rhetoric together with economic measures had yielded some results, including reductions in Iran's ballistic missile tests and harassment of foreign ships.

"What the president is trying to do with this tweet is what he's succeeded in doing in the last year and a half, signaling to the Iranians: 'Don't test me; don't close the Strait of Hormuz; don't interfere with international shipping,'" Dubowitz said. "'I will order [Defense Secretary Jim] Mattis to sink your ships.'"

But in the absence of a direct challenge from Tehran, few administration officials have supported pushing back militarily against Iran, even in places where groups trained and armed by Iran have directly challenged U.S. objectives, such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

While the United States has acted several times to halt direct threats against its forces in Syria, Pentagon leaders, including Mattis, have consistently opposed risking another costly Middle Eastern conflict as they seek to reorient the military toward threats from Russia and China.

Instead, they have advocated an indirect approach to countering Iran's destabilizing activities, building up partner forces in Syria and Iraq and seeking to interdict weapons smuggled to Shiite rebels in Yemen.

Trump's tough language and threats appear to mirror his approach to North Korea and the leader he ridiculed last year as "Little Rocket Man." After a string of menacing statements, Trump and leader Kim Jong Un sat down for a high-profile summit in June.

But Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, warned that those tactics may not succeed with Iran.

"Iranian officials tend to be more prideful. Unless [supreme leader Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei is facing significant economic distress and existential angst, I suspect he will avoid

negotiations with the United States during the Trump era,” he said. “The depth of mutual mistrust and contempt is too great.”

Jarrett Blanc, who worked on Iran issues at the State Department during the Obama administration, said Trump’s threats did not appear to be connected to a larger plan making a case for war, similar to what occurred with Iraq before the U.S. invasion in 2003.

“I don’t think Donald Trump has decided, in the way George W. Bush and Cheney decided with Iraq, that I’m going to go to war, and I’m going to build up this narrative and escalatory spiral to get me there,’ “ he said.

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Pompeo’s California Speech Draws Questions From Iranian Diaspora: ‘How Much Do They Really Even Know About The People Of Iran?’ (Parvini, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Sarah Parvini

Farshad Farahat tuned into Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo’s speech in Simi Valley in hopes of hearing him lay out a plan for helping the Iranian people. Instead, he said, all he heard was bluster.

“They don’t have a policy when it comes to Iran and that’s the problem,” Farahat, 39, said. “The fact is they are deeply hurting the Iranian people.”

In a Sunday evening speech titled “Supporting Iranian Voices,” Pompeo said the leadership in Tehran “resembles the Mafia more than a government.” His remarks, given at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, marked a rare outreach by the Trump administration to the community — part of a nascent campaign by the U.S. government to discredit Iran’s leaders

Pompeo called Iran’s leading clerics “hypocritical holy men” and blasted Iran’s government as “not normal” while pledging support for Iranians who would challenge it. He pointed to the Iranian government’s human rights abuses as proof of his assertions but said the U.S. is open to speaking with leaders there if Tehran changes its policies.

Among California’s diverse Iranian diaspora, reactions to Pompeo’s speech ranged from a shred of hope that the Trump administration could effect change in Iran to fear that the secretary of State is prepared to resort to war. An estimated 500,000 Iranian Americans live in Southern California, the largest enclave outside Iran.

Farahat, an actor in Los Angeles, said Pompeo’s stance would only strengthen Iran’s elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He worries that pulling out of the nuclear accord and reimposing harsh sanctions against Iran will only suffocate the country’s working and middle class. Iranians face worsening inflation and a decline of their currency, which economic analysts say could make imports scarcer, and medicine in particular more difficult to acquire.

“I was hoping to hear how he would engage Iran economically … to strengthen civil society, the democratic movement and the middle class, and weed out the theocracy,” Farahat said.

Before Pompeo’s speech, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged President Trump to “make peace” with Iran, according to a report from the semiofficial Iranian Students News Agency.

“America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars,” Rouhani said.

Trump returned fire on Twitter on Sunday night.

“NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE,” Trump tweeted. “WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!”

In a statement, the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans said its members spoke with Pompeo and informed him of the “near unanimous opposition Iranian Americans have toward the administration’s travel ban and any form of military conflict with Iran.” The group also cautioned that the diaspora’s support for the Iranian people should not be confused with support for opposition groups, such as Mujahedin Khalq, which was previously designated as a terrorist organization.

Iranian Americans who oppose Trump’s policies said they wondered how the administration could express its support for Iran’s citizens while imposing harsh sanctions and barring them from entering the United States.

“Frankly, I thought it was insulting to sit in front of a room full of Iranian Americans and tell them what they’ve already known for decades without offering anything realistic or tangible with regard to how to address the problem,” said Reza Marashi, research director for the National Iranian American Council.

Marashi said he doesn't believe the Trump administration is "concerned about the well-being of 80 million Iranians" or about Iranian Americans.

"They're using us as political tools," he said.

Masti Lashkari said she found Pompeo's remarks hypocritical. Lashkari, who was born in Iran and moved to California in 1994, said some of her family members have been affected by the travel ban. She watched Sunday's speech online, she said, and felt Pompeo was sharing his opinion on the regime without providing a plan.

"They claim they care about the people of Iran, but how much do they really even know about the people of Iran?" Lashkari, 33, said. "If they really, sincerely care about the people, why are they placing these weird rules and regulations on the people of Iran?"

Like many Iranian Americans who attended the Sunday evening event, Ahmad Ahmadian made an appearance because he was curious about what Pompeo would say.

A student activist and Green Movement supporter, Ahmadian left Iran in 2011 after he was kicked out of the University of Tehran for protesting against government policies.

"I've been skeptical about Americans' foreign policy toward Iran. I don't believe the nuclear deal improved human rights in Iran," said Ahmadian, 28. "We've tried to create change in Iran through reform for the past 20 years, and it hasn't had a positive outcome."

Ahmadian, who said he supports sanctions against Iran, said he knew the policy could make life harder for his family there. But it's a trade-off he's willing to take.

"Sanctions are a better alternative than war," he said.

Faraz Kiani, who read about Pompeo's talk after the gathering, said any comments against Iran's government are welcome — regardless of whom they come from.

"I'm not a Trump supporter. I don't care about right or left," Kiani said. "Any time they bring awareness and call out the government for what they are in Iran, I applaud that."

A California native, Kiani said he voted for President Obama twice but felt his administration "betrayed the Iranian people with the deal he made." He said he doesn't agree with placing sanctions on Iran, nor does he want to see a war with the Islamic Republic. But he saw Pompeo's remarks as an opportunity to shed light on human rights abuses in his family's homeland.

"These people are billionaires, their families live lavishly, and the people in Iran are suffering," Kiani said. "Nobody wants war as far as I'm concerned, but I think the tough talk is what works with these guys."

Others said they were looking for new information on how the U.S. would approach Iran, but Pompeo failed to deliver.

"I was kind of disappointed," Fred Parvaneh said.

Parvaneh left Tehran when he was 17, a few years before the Islamic Revolution, and never returned. Now 60, he said he doesn't want to see a war with Iran.

"I don't think it's my place to really dictate what Iranians' path should be, but I despise the clerical rule," he said of Iran's government.

He said he's happy to see Trump's Cabinet taking a stand against the Iranian regime, but he is worried that it could come at the cost of the average Iranian.

"Do I like the travel ban? Absolutely not. I think it's unfair," Parvaneh said. "Deep down inside, I'm sort of happy about Trump's strong stance — but it's directed at the regime and not at the Iranian people."

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EDITORIALS & OP-EDS

Iranian Americans Must Speak Up – Not Let Pompeo Speak For Them (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

July 22 is one of those dates on the calendar that stands out. That was the day in 2014 that agents of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) raided my wife's and my home in Tehran and hauled us off to Evin prison to an uncertain fate. I was confined there for a year and a half before I was finally released.

Now, July 22 will also go down as an important date for the Iranian American community as a whole. As President Trump tweeted one of his most threatening messages yet at the president of Iran on Sunday night, his secretary of state addressed members of the Iranian American community in Southern California. At the event, called "Supporting Iranian Voices," Mike Pompeo signaled a U.S. commitment to support efforts to undermine Iran's clerical regime.

I went as a witness. This was my third July 22 as a free man, and I chose to spend it at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library where Pompeo made his case against the Islamic republic. I wanted to know who would be there. Exactly which Iranian voices would Pompeo be supporting?

To my surprise, there were a range of attendees representing the different ethnic, religious and political views that make up the community of Iranians in the United States. Among the several hundred Iranian Americans in attendance were

professionals, politicians, educators, entertainers and entrepreneurs. That's a good thing.

Organizers of the event at the State Department told me that the guests were individually selected to demonstrate the diversity within the community, but that many of those who were invited declined and others didn't even bother to respond to the invitation. Still others openly boycotted the event. They wanted to be as far as possible from what they saw as the opening arguments in this administration's case for regime change.

That may ultimately prove to be what this event was about, but it also provided a rare opportunity for Iranian Americans to engage directly with an administration as it begins to formulate its plans for their ancestral homeland. For anyone to whom Iran is important, now isn't the moment to sit on the sidelines.

The Iranian voices I'm hearing — people I'm in touch with inside Iran and others in the diaspora — have long felt trapped in the middle of a decades-old struggle between a state that doesn't represent their interests and a foreign power that says it does but has shown little regard for assisting them in meaningful ways, and in fact has consistently taken action that hurts average Iranians.

Pompeo, for his part, highlighted a long list of problems — including naming corrupt officials and describing human rights violations — but offered few ways by which the current U.S. leadership plans to help alleviate what it calls Iranian suffering. Most of what Pompeo said about the depravity of Iran's rulers was true, but when coupled with U.S. moves that directly hurt Iranians — specifically, stiff economic sanctions and the recently upheld travel ban — it is difficult for the administration to support its own claims that the well-being and prosperity of Iranians matter.

I would love nothing more to be proved wrong about this. I suppose I was there to find out, and engaging with the nation's top diplomat provided some fresh insight. I spoke to Pompeo after the speech and asked him what is being done for Americans still imprisoned in Iran. I also brought up the concerns most Iranians have about the travel ban. That portion of the evening was off the record, but on those two issues, at least, I walked away with more hope than when I arrived.

I asked members of his staff about ways to support Iranian voices inside Iran, which could undermine the current regime's power. That could mean bolstering the strength of civil society through programs that give Iranian private citizens access to educational tools, an unblocked Internet, and the opportunity to engage directly with the rest of the world through commerce and legal forms of temporary

immigration. None of those seem to be priorities in the current administration strategy for weakening the regime.

Still, I had the opportunity to raise issues and so did others, who talked about the need to support Iranian women, religious minorities and the importance of adjusting the travel ban, to name a few. Such venues to address U.S. leaders directly don't come around often, and it's for that reason I think Iranian Americans must stay engaged while the possibility to do so remains open.

Those opposed to the administration's Iran agenda should know, though, that if they don't begin to make their voices heard, and quickly, the narrative that's being formulated — the one that says the Iranian American community is on board with the U.S. government's unstated efforts to destabilize and remove the current regime whatever the cost — will be attributed to the entire community, and all will have to live with that.

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Pompeo's Iran Truth-Telling (WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Wall Street Journal](#)

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Iranian Terror On European Soil (Abedini, WSJ)

I was attacked in Istanbul in 1990. An attack in Paris was foiled this month.

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Wall Street Journal](#)

By Hossein Abedini

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Trump's Tweet Threat To Iran Is Irrational, Lacks Credibility (USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[USA Today](#)

President Donald Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani exchanged angry threats as Washington prepares to reimpose economic sanctions. Trump's incoherent approach to Iran

President Donald Trump is once again issuing bombastic threats of war, this time against Iran. This administration's total lack of a coherent approach to Iran has created a strategic vacuum, wherein U.S. policy is reduced to the

hackneyed regime change rhetoric of neoconservatives and the primal screams of an undisciplined, callow president.

On Sunday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, taking note of an increasingly antagonistic Trump administration, said America should know that “peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars.”

In response, Trump tweeted: “NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED.”

That seems a bit of an overreaction, but it is even stranger in the context of Trump’s tweets from 2013, in which he lambasted President Barack Obama for planning to go to war against Iran “to save face” and “to show how tough he is.”

And let’s not forget that as president elect, Trump promised in late 2016 to “stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about.”

Trump’s Twitter threat came just as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was giving a speech Sunday in California aimed at rallying the Iranian people and diaspora to undermine the regime in Tehran. Pompeo railed against the Iranian regime’s tyranny and rights abuses, offering sympathy and support for those who seek to overthrow it.

The notion that the Trump administration cares one whit about democracy and human rights in Iran is so transparently ludicrous as to hardly even require refutation. After all, the White House is enthusiastically supporting the authoritarian regime in Saudi Arabia, a tyranny much worse than the one in Iran and which is committing war crimes in Yemen with U.S. help.

Contrary to Pompeo’s feigned concern for the welfare of the citizens of Iran, the administration’s approach harms, rather than helps, the Iranian people.

The truth is that Trump’s threat lacks credibility. A U.S. attack would provoke a wider regional war that would be an order of magnitude worse than what we saw in Iraq.

The Trump administration’s hostility toward Iran is irrational. Backing out of the nuclear deal not only created a proliferation risk in Iran, it also locked the White House in a policy of confrontation. The result has been confusion, needless antagonism and a dangerous risk of stumbling into yet another costly war in the Middle East.

John Glaser is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. Follow him on Twitter: @jwoglaser Trump is playing the tough guy for his base

One has to wonder exactly what President Donald Trump’s motives are.

The United States should never allow threats from a foreign adversary. No one can argue the fact that in order for America to remain strong, we should defend our nation, not only physically but politically as well. Taking to Twitter to do so, however, is not the best way of handling a potentially devastating situation with a nation that has nuclear capabilities.

Trump is coming off of a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in which much of the news media and opposition are accusing him of being “soft.” Some have gone as far as saying that he acted cowardly and even treasonous on the world stage in Helsinki.

Trump needs to prove otherwise, and while something seems to be deterring him from showing strength in the presence of Putin, he has always been quite willing to do so when it comes to Islamic nations. When the opportunity presented itself, to defend America against a verbal threat from Iran, Trump jumped at the opportunity, knowing very well that it would both please his base and show that he still has the guts to stand up to an adversary (as long as it’s not Russia).

As special counsel Robert Mueller’s probe digs its claws into Trump’s campaign officials — and appears to be working its way into his inner circle — it will not come as a surprise to me if he uses the prospects of war to try to distract America from what Mueller may end up finding. War has been a useful tool for previous presidents who have slipped in approval, as well as those who needed to distract the media from problems at home.

Keep an eye on what happens with Iran as Mueller’s investigation continues. Does Trump use war to rile up his base while also attempting to drown out news coverage of his possible Russian ties? Only time will tell.

What our readers are saying

President Donald Trump seems not to be able to track what he says. He threatened North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with “fire and fury” in the past, and that threat came to nothing but muddled denuclearization talks. Now, he is trading threats with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warning of consequences “the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered.” Is there any reason for Rouhani to take this threat any more seriously than the one made against North Korea? It appears Trump acts in the spur of the moment without screening his thoughts or controlling his anger. President Theodore Roosevelt said “speak softly and carry a big stick,” but Trump stomps around making big noises doing nothing. Americans should be grateful that he hasn’t gotten us into a war, yet. But it is becoming increasingly clear that he lacks any credibility with our allies or other foreign powers.

George Magakis; Norristown, Pa.

Finally, a president who has the guts to say enough is enough. He said what was needed by the strongest country on earth to one that has burned the American flag and where its people call us Satan. If they are looking for an enemy to fight with, do not look our way or beware.

— Jim Bradley

I truly believe that it behooves an American administration to take the high road and not allow itself to be caught in an exchange of words with tin-pot dictators. In the end, I'd prefer that decisions be made with cool logic, not overhyped egos.

— John R. Grace

It's refreshing to have a president exhibit strength, unlike Barack Obama, who bent over backwards for other world leaders.

— Stephen Jobson

If Obama were still president, he would threaten Iran by dropping pallets of money on it. Or maybe giving its people U.S. citizenship. Or letting them invade another country, like Iraq or Syria.

— Robert Thompson

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Gaza's Future Is Up To Hamas (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Washington Post](#)

The low-grade conflict underway between Israel and Hamas since March nearly escalated into a full-scale war over the weekend. After an Israeli soldier was shot and killed near its border with the Gaza Strip, Israeli planes carried out more than 60 airstrikes against Hamas targets. On Monday a cease-fire was barely holding, but none of the issues fueling the fighting had been addressed. The trouble is, barring a radical and unlikely change of direction by Hamas, they probably can't be.

The militant Islamic movement, which has controlled Gaza for more than a decade and fought three previous wars with Israel, wants to break an economic stranglehold on the territory maintained by Israel as well as Egypt and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority. But it has been unwilling to make the concessions necessary for a political agreement with Israel or with its fellow Palestinians. It will neither recognize the Jewish state nor give up its weapons to the new Gaza government it says it favors, headed by the Palestinian Authority.

Instead, Hamas has been trying to force Israel's hand with new forms of asymmetrical warfare. First it organized masses of civilians to march on the border fence, which led more than 130 of them to be killed by Israel's Defense Forces. Then it

began launching burning kites and inflated condoms to touch off fires on Israeli territory. That provoked retaliatory airstrikes and threats by the government of Benjamin Netanyahu to initiate a military invasion.

In reality, Mr. Netanyahu will do his best to avoid such an operation, as he has in the past. While Israeli forces could capture the territory and topple the Hamas administration, they would be hard-pressed either to install a new government or to govern the strip themselves. Nor is Israel eager to see an accord between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, since that might lead to an expanded Hamas presence in the West Bank, where an uneasy quiet prevails.

The Trump administration and a U.N. mediator would like to expand humanitarian assistance to Gaza and launch projects to rebuild its economy. They are right to try addressing the misery of the territory's 2 million people, more than half of whom live below the poverty line. But their implicit assumption, that Hamas will observe a long-term cease-fire in exchange for economic aid, is flawed: The group has been choosing war with Israel over development for years.

The "Hamas leadership is holding the Palestinians of Gaza captive," a trio of Trump aides wrote in *The Post* last week. They are right, but there is no easy way to alter that status quo. For now, the best available course is to encourage Israel to counter the group's provocations with minimal force. Flaming kites are not a strategic threat and should not be treated as such. If Hamas fails either to obtain a lifting of the economic blockade or to provoke Israel into creating more Palestinian victims, the pressure for it to change will grow.

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Athens And Moscow's Stunning Falling-Out (Konstandaras, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[New York Times](#)

By Nikos Konstandaras

For centuries, even when Athens was a bastion of the West during the Cold War, Greece and Russia have seen themselves as natural allies. Both are Christian Orthodox nations on Islam's western frontiers; even as a NATO member, Greece tried to maintain channels of communication with the Soviet Union. Yet a sudden dispute over alleged Russian meddling in Greek affairs has escalated rapidly. This could have long-term consequences for Greek-Russian ties and for the Western Balkans.

This month, Athens informed Moscow that it was expelling two Russian diplomats and refusing entry to two others. Among the accusations: the four were trying to stoke opposition to a recent agreement signed by Greece and a

northern neighbor, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, ending a 27-year dispute over the latter's name.

Ratification by both countries would open the way for a renamed the Republic of North Macedonia to join NATO and the European Union. Greek opponents of the deal object to their neighbors' use of "Macedonia" in any form, saying this implies claims on the Greek province of the same name; Macedonian nationalists object to adding a qualifier to their country's name.

It is easy to see how Russia, which is opposed to Macedonia joining NATO, could be tempted to exploit this volatile mix to encourage hard-liners on both sides. Macedonia's prime minister, Zoran Zaev, claimed in an interview with BuzzFeed News that Greek businessmen "sympathetic to the Russian cause" paid large sums of money to foes of the deal in his country to commit acts of violence before a referendum on the agreement is held.

The Russian foreign ministry issued a stern protest to the Greek ambassador over the expulsions and has threatened to respond further. On July 18, a ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, declared that Greece was acting under pressure from its allies and warned that "such actions do not remain without consequences."

The Greek government reacted angrily. The foreign ministry in Athens declared these statements "a characteristic example of disrespect for a third country and a lack of understanding of today's world, in which states, regardless of their size, are independent and can exercise an independent, multidimensional and democratic foreign policy." It added, "In any case, the Russian authorities themselves are very well aware of what their people do."

A few days earlier, a State Department spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, tweeted: "We support Greece defending its sovereignty. Russia must end its destabilizing behavior." In Moscow's view, this alignment between Athens and Washington confirmed its suspicions of collusion.

Until now, Russian officials had been full of praise for Greece. In 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov noted Greece's opposition to sanctions against Russia. "We appreciate the stance of the Greek government, which understands the complete counterproductivity of attempts to speak this language with Russia," he said after a meeting in Moscow with his Greek counterpart, Nikos Kotzias. Last Friday, the Russian Ambassador in Athens, Andrey Maslov, tweeted: "The past years were a time of an unprecedented boom in Russian-Greek relations." But, he added, "The actions of the Greek side ... have become a disappointment for us."

The Greek move was unexpected. Not only has Athens always been careful in its dealings with Moscow, but this

sudden rupture was executed by what is considered to be the most pro-Russian government Greece has had — a government that in March refused to join its Western allies in expelling Russian diplomats in retaliation for Moscow's alleged involvement in the poisoning of a former Russian double agent and his daughter in Britain.

The coalition government is dominated by the radical-left Syriza party, which opposed international sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Its leader, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, visited Moscow for support in 2015, while threatening the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and other creditors that Greece would walk away from its bailout commitments.

The junior coalition partner, Independent Greeks, is a hard-right nationalist party. Its leader, Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, while an outspoken supporter of Moscow, has also worked closely with United States military officials; his political contortions include denouncing the Macedonia deal while remaining in the government.

The United States has been Greece's major ally since 1947, when Washington stepped to help a right-wing government defeat Communist forces in a civil war in 1946-49. In the years after, the Greek left opposed the United States while supporting closer ties with the Soviet Union. Russia is now, by default, the antithesis to the "imperialist alliance," as Greece's small but unbending Communist Party calls the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Communists, echoing Russian officials, saw the expulsions as Mr. Tsipras's "gift" to NATO, timed to coincide with the recent NATO summit.

Support for Russia's positions goes beyond any effort to embarrass the government or oppose the Macedonia deal. President Vladimir Putin enjoys broad support among Greeks, more than in any other European country. Greece (along with Vietnam, the Philippines and Tanzania) was one of only four countries among 37 surveyed by the Pew Research Center last year in which Mr. Putin got more than 50 percent approval for his international performance.

This could be because he projects the image of a powerful leader who is proud of his Eastern Orthodox heritage, visiting the monastic community of Mount Athos in northern Greece and playing on deep-rooted feelings in his own country and here. During the nearly four centuries of subjugation to Ottoman rule, Greeks yearned for liberation and many saw Russia as their salvation. Although these expectations were usually disappointed, Russia has often played a crucial role in Greek history.

Major milestones included a 1774 treaty under which Russia assumed the right to protect all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. This allowed Greek merchants and

shipowners to fly the Russian flag, thus escaping Ottoman taxes and expanding their wealth and influence. In 1821, when the Greek War of Independence broke out, the Greek Orthodox patriarch was hanged by the Turks and his body thrown into the Bosphorus; when it resurfaced unexpectedly, Greeks took it to Russia, to the city of Odessa, where it was afforded a grand funeral in the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1827, a combined British, French and Russian fleet destroyed an Ottoman-Egyptian fleet at Navarino, leading to the declaration of an independent Greece after years of struggle.

More recently, the relationship has been more complicated — with Soviet support and then abandonment of Communist forces in the civil war, with Russia's intricate economic and political relationship with Cyprus, with the current marriage of convenience between Moscow and Ankara. There is also a strong ethnic-religious current that influences politics in both Greece and Russia.

The question now is, what prompted a Greek government with pro-Moscow sympathies to take such drastic action? Was it because of fears of violence over the Macedonia issue, as suggested by the claims of Mr. Zaev, the Macedonian prime minister? Was it because foreign meddling with the fires of nationalism in Greece could harm the government's prospects in elections that must be held by autumn 2019? Were the expulsions a way of declaring allegiance to the United States?

In any case, this unexpected turn of events could lead — despite Athens's protestations to the contrary — to a re-evaluation of Greece's relations with Russia. The result could be Athens playing a more prominent role in stabilizing the western Balkans, and aligning itself more fully with European Union policies rather than deferring to Russia's concerns and interests.

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Putin Is Weak. Europe Doesn't Have To Be (Mead, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Walter Russell Mead

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Trump's Rude He-Man Act Is Catnip To His Fans. They Don't Care That He's Putty For Putin (Henneberger, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Melinda Henneberger

Those of us unenchanted by President Donald Trump will never see what those thrilled by him see. But one thing that the thrilled routinely bring up is how deeply satisfying they find his willingness to say what others won't and do what others wouldn't. Unfortunately, I don't notice many of us holding much back these days. But in the paean of Missouri grandma Deborah Bolding, Trump "doesn't take anybody's crap."

He's the FU president, and the pleasure of watching him excoriate Canadians and embarrass 92-year-old Queen Elizabeth apparently excuses even his dead-on impersonation of a Russian asset. His born-in-a-barn rudeness and he-man assaults on the most vulnerable? That's being real and finally showing the elites and the rest of the world who's in charge.

Which is why in the Missouri town where the country's largest nail company is "on the brink of extinction" as a direct result of Trump's steel tariff, supporters told me again and again that they are willing to suffer economic hardship in return for the completely unguilty pleasure of watching him stick it to the Chinese — and, by the way, to undocumented immigrants. What's so studly about buttering up bullies?

Even one of the two Democrats and the only African-American among the dozens of people I interviewed in Poplar Bluff volunteered that he likes that Trump is playing the boss and won't ever back down.

Except, apparently, to Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, whom Trump — to the unhappy surprise of his team — just invited to the White House this fall for Helsinki, the sequel.

We who were absent the day they passed out the glasses that make Trump's insecurity look like strength wonder what's so studly about standing up to true friends while buttering up the real bullies.

For a minute after the Helsinki summit, it was still possible to ask whether the FU president had finally gone too far in taking Putin's word that he didn't attack our election, instead of believing his own FBI and his own country. We are his country, right? Would the former national security party really shrug off Trump's televised deference to a thug? After some mild remonstrations, that's exactly what happened.

Former presidential nominees John McCain, at home in Arizona with brain cancer, and Mitt Romney, running for the U.S. Senate from Trump-immune Utah, were among the rare Republicans who had the fortitude to do what the president's fans say they love about him: They told the plain truth, while many a congressional Republican squeaked that while Trump might have expressed himself more clearly, the only real problem was the unflattering and unfair coverage of the confab.

Trump was perfectly clear and said what he always says about Putin and Russian interference. Then his fellow Republicans said what they always do, too, and defended him.

"I think anyone who watched the press conference, including the president himself, would say it wasn't his finest hour," said Rep. Warren Davidson, an Ohio Republican. Then he and his colleagues did nothing. Nothing, that is, but pretend to accept at face value the president's explanation that he had really said the opposite of what he intended to say in Helsinki.

Sure, because when Trump said he wouldn't know why Russians would have interfered in our election, as per our entire intelligence community, what he meant to say is that he wouldn't know why they wouldn't have.

Likewise, when he was asked whether he thought Russians were still trying to interfere in this year's elections, he said, "No." But according to his press secretary, he really meant only that no, he wasn't going to answer or take any more questions.

Maybe later he'll say that when he says he'll think about the interesting question of whether to turn over former U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul to Russian agents for interrogation and who knows what else, he really meant, "Hell. No."

Even the Senate in its stupor voted 98-0 that that wasn't going to happen.

Republicans must pray every night that when the reason for Trump's consistent pro-Putin bias finally comes out, they don't go down in history as the cowards who let Sen. McCain speak the truth from his sick bed — the truth they couldn't choke out from the halls of Congress.

Meanwhile, I think anyone with eyes to see must agree that it's not their finest hour.

Melinda Henneberger is an editorial writer and a columnist for The Kansas City Star.

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I Was Born Stateless And Persecuted In Myanmar. Here Is What It Took For Me To Come To The U.S. (Mohammed, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Imran Mohammed

I arrived in Chicago this spring, one of a handful of refugees sent to the United States under an agreement with Australia. I'm enjoying my freedom here and looking forward to the chance to get an education and a job and, at last, to lead a

normal life after years spent looking for a country to call my own.

My journey here has been a long one.

I was born in 1994, in Myanmar, to Rohingya parents. Although Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations, the government refuses to recognize us as one of the eight "national indigenous races" and we face constant persecution as stateless people.

When I was 16, I left Myanmar by boat, passing through Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea. I was detained in Indonesia for 17 months and on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island for almost five years by the Australian government.

In 2013, Australia proclaimed that any asylum-seekers arriving by boat would never enter its country. Since then, it has sent thousands to Manus Island and the island nation of Nauru. The government said it was trying to prevent more dangerous boat crossings and drownings at sea.

It trapped people like me on land, consigning us to prison-like camps.

On Manus Island, every day was filled with trauma. We were treated like animals by the security guards and some of us were beaten by local people, but no action was taken. We did not receive proper medical attention. We had to beg for the privilege of a phone call.

We were treated like animals by the security guards and some of us were beaten by local people, but no action was taken.

One day I made a request to call my uncle, who was ill and near death. My case worker went to her boss and he went to his boss for permission. It took two days, and by that time, my uncle had passed away.

All the while, the Australian government threatened forcible deportation, indefinite incarceration and resettlement in Papua New Guinea, where we are not wanted. Our hopes would rise when caring people fought for us in protests and in legal proceedings, and crash when international attention drifted to some other problem in some other place.

We spent our time worrying about our survival, safety and our loved ones whom we had left behind. We lost interest in improving our lives, because we couldn't see any future. Depression, boredom and fear affected us day and night, and all this continues for those who are still held captive.

For years, Australia has looked for places to send the people it has trapped on these islands. The United States agreed in 2016 to take around 1,250 refugees, and I was one of the lucky ones.

The process began on March 3, 2017, when an officer from the International Rescue Committee's Resettlement Support Center interviewed me. My biometric information was collected a month later. I was then scheduled for another interview, in August, this time with officers from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In September, I was called for a mandatory medical examination and U.S. health screening. My refugee application was finally accepted in December.

Also in 2017, while my fortunes were taking a turn for the better, my family had to flee Myanmar due to a brutal military assault on the Rohingya people and now have no clue what the future will bring.

In Chicago, I think of them, and I think of my friends left behind on Manus Island. They live in centers dotted around the town of Lorengau without any assurance of safety and increasingly restricted in their movements. A new curfew means they can't leave the campgrounds from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

I am happy to be in the United States, hopeful and motivated for the future. I want to study and work so that I can create something wonderful out of this gift of freedom. I am grateful that the Trump administration honored the agreement reached previously with the Australian government, to accept selected men, women and children from Manus and Nauru. But many people, many of my people, have been left behind.

Imran Mohammed is a stateless refugee from Myanmar living in the United States.

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The U.S. Makes A New Push To Bolster Taiwan's Military Defenses. China Won't Like It (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

The State Department's recently reported request for Marines to return to Taiwan for the first time since 1979 to defend the de facto U.S. embassy there is not an isolated event. Instead, it underscores what appears to be newfound willingness within the U.S. government and Congress to challenge China and pay more attention to Taiwan's defense.

For several decades, Washington followed a policy that shied away from irritating China when it came to Taiwan. As the island of 23 million evolved into one of Asia's most vibrant democracies, with a boisterously free press, successive American administrations were careful not to provoke Beijing even as they tried to shelter Taiwan diplomatically and provide for the territory's defense.

An influential report written in 2008 by a retired U.S. naval commander was embraced by officials from the Obama administration because it argued that the United States no longer needed to sell Taiwan big-ticket items, such as fighter jets, or support its submarine program, which would anger Beijing. Instead, the author, William Murray, contended that Taiwan could forgo an air force and a big navy and focus instead on making itself a "porcupine" by adding smaller weapons systems and mobile infantry units that could defend Taiwan's beaches from an all-out Chinese assault. The logic, in the words of Thomas X. Hammes, a former Marine Corps colonel now at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, was that "a grizzly bear can eat a porcupine anytime it wants to, but it just isn't worth the pain."

However, intensifying Chinese pressure on Taiwan, a growing disenchantment with China within the ranks of the U.S. government and Congress, and the rise to prominence of Taiwan's friends within the Trump administration have presaged a move away from the "porcupine" strategy toward one more willing to confront Beijing. This trend could continue further if President Trump, always unpredictable, lets his advisers on the National Security Council and Defense Department have their way.

Starting earlier this year, China's air force fighters and bombers began circling Taiwan, forcing Taiwan's air force to scramble its jets. In late April, China's state-run television released footage of People's Liberation Army forces invading a mock Taiwanese village. And late last month, Chinese naval forces had a drill in the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, on the diplomatic front, the Dominican Republic became the third country in less than two years to sever official ties with Taiwan to favor China. Now, because of Beijing's accelerating campaign to diplomatically isolate Taipei, only 19 countries recognize Taiwan.

China's tactics have alienated many members of a younger generation of State Department officials who used to be considered the strongest proponents of smooth relations with Beijing. Exasperation with China has bled into Congress, which has adopted its most activist position on Taiwan since 1979, when Congress defied the administration of then-President Jimmy Carter to pass the Taiwan Relations Act, mandating that the U.S. government help in Taiwan's defense.

In February, the House and Senate unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which called on the Trump administration to send high-ranking U.S. officials to liaise with Taiwan's government. Both in the Pentagon and on the National Security Council, Trump administration officials are far more sympathetic to Taiwan's challenges than their counterparts

have been in the past. They have given the U.S. Navy more leeway to challenge China in the Pacific. Earlier this month, the Navy dispatched two destroyers through the Taiwan Strait for the first time since 2017.

In April, the State Department approved a plan to allow U.S. defense companies to explore selling Taiwan technology and weapons systems for its submarine program. The decision marked the first sign of life in an endeavor that last received U.S. support in 2001 when President George W. Bush announced a U.S. program to help Taiwan purchase eight diesel submarines.

It's still a long shot whether Taiwan is going to be able to cobble together a new submarine, but this move marks a major break with the Obama administration, which had essentially shelved the deal. In another shift, there's also talk now among experts and industry sources that the U.S. government is seriously considering selling Taiwan jet fighters for the first time since 1992. Senior Republicans in the Senate have called on the Trump administration to sell Taiwan the F-35. Others have argued for an upgraded version of the F-16, which since the sale in 1992 has served as the backbone of Taiwan's air force.

The Trump administration is also pushing Taiwan's government, led by President Tsai Ing-wen, to substantially increase its defense spending. American officials have said that ideally Taiwan should double its defense outlays. Taiwan currently devotes less than 2 percent of its gross domestic product to defense.

Some experts, such as Ian Easton, the author of "The Chinese Invasion Threat" and a research fellow at Project 2049 Institute, think that this shift in U.S. policy is overdue and that the United States needs to support both big-ticket items such as fighters for an air force, as well as armed drones, smart mines and other weapons that were part of the porcupine strategy, too.

"There are certain capabilities that no other country can provide Taiwan," he said. "If we don't, no one will."

The wild card in this equation is Trump. Will Trump sell Taiwan down the river in order to make a deal with China over trade or North Korea, or will he listen to the advice from Congress and give Taiwan the help it needs?

Of course, if Trump increases American support of the sole democratic Chinese territory in the world, China will be furious. When reports emerged that the State Department had requested Marines to protect the American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto American embassy on the island, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman urged the Trump administration to "exercise caution." Should the United States

start selling Taiwan jet fighters again, the reaction from Beijing will be substantially worse.

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Young Pakistan Is Ready To 'Just Do It.' Whatever 'It' Is (Hanif, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Mohammed Hanif

Imran Khan, Pakistan's prime minister in waiting, hates being a loser. He has said, "As a sportsman I know winning & losing are part of the game," but that was after coming out of retirement to win the Cricket World Cup in 1992. And losing doesn't seem to be part of his idea of the political game.

Yet for a very long time Khan was a loser — that other kind of loser, the one you still hear in President Trump's Twitter voice. For much of two decades, while pledging to bring about a revolution and saying things like "when I become prime minister," he prowled the margins of Pakistani politics. A darling of English tabloids, his rallies back home weren't attracting much of a crowd.

But over the last five years, after Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (P.T.I.), lost the 2013 election to Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N, Khan has become the main contender to power. Weeks before the general election on July 25, even Khan's opponents were calling him ladla, the favorite. Sharif, who was removed from his post as prime minister last year over corruption charges, has just been sentenced to prison. Other candidates have been hounded by the police or the courts or are being killed by the Taliban or the Islamic State.

People who used to laugh at Khan's ambition have been falling over one another to get on the P.T.I. ticket — or, failing that, to take selfies with him. There's even an app that generates those.

Khan is fond of using sporting metaphors to convey his message. When his opponents are called out on something, he says that an "umpire's finger" has been raised — and when one of them joins his party, TV headlines scream, "another wicket falls." Most of Khan's young followers have only seen him play cricket on YouTube, but they seem inspired by his vision of a new Pakistan, a Pakistan free of corruption, a Pakistan that is respected on the world stage. Just like he was as a star athlete.

When Khan started out in politics, it was like he was throwing a party for a young Pakistan. About 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30, so he has brought music to political rallies. Today, even conservative party leaders who

once wouldn't be seen near a guitar are hiring DJs to play music during their speeches.

Khan has also brought into the fold the very politicians who for years called him a loser. He has surrounded himself with land grabbers, feudal lords and rent seekers. He justifies surrounding himself with "electables" — people with dedicated vote banks — because they "know the science of winning elections." Many of the candidates on P.T.I.'s lineup for the election are professional politicians who have been party-hopping for generations.

Khan has finally become a traditional politician — and in the process he might be taking the country's youth back in time.

In one of his first protest rallies during what had been a very hot summer, some of his supporters clashed with police. One of them was caught on camera saying, if the police beats us up how will the revolution happen? He went on to add, famously, "we are wasting away in this heat."

The complaint about being hot was silly but important for coming from a new kind of voice: from someone who absolutely didn't expect to be beaten up by the police. But Khan's young warriors do cheer when the police beat up other protesters or the army abducts its detractors and makes them disappear. Khan's critics call them "youthias" — a riff on chutiya, slang for a jerk.

Social media accounts with Khan's picture and his party's flag are full of staggering misogyny. (His followers seem to take after him.) Many of them claim to be super patriots. Some say that Malala Yousafzai's shooting in 2012 was staged and that India is sponsoring terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Khan's new Pakistan was going to be a bit like Sweden and a bit like Singapore — or, really, like old Medina: According to him, all welfare state models are borrowed from early Islamic empires. He supports the blasphemy law and has defended the justice system adopted by the Taliban from Pashtun tribes.

Khan's opponents often chide him for his marriages and affairs, his character flaws, his spiritual confusion. But these things have rarely done harm to a male politician in the past. And Khan seems to think that he has enough electables behind him. That the Taliban listen to him even though they are reported to have threatened him. That he can knock down a corrupt system with the help of the politicians who built it.

Now, he just needs to keep the army on board.

Democracy was restored in 2008 after nearly a decade of Gen. Pervez Musharraf in power. But the decade since has shown that this model isn't working. Missing persons' cases are increasing. The media are censored at levels not seen

even under dictatorship. And the Pakistani army would like to run the country the way it used to: It's fine for elected politicians to cut ribbons at inaugurations but not for them to decide foreign policy or internal security.

But can Khan take on the military establishment, which still sits at the top of the food chain and is still fighting an eternal war against India and its own people, too? His opponents describe his supporters as "boot polishia," those who lick the army's boots. If Khan comes to power, like all prime ministers before him, he will try to wriggle out from under those boots. And that's not likely to end well.

Khan seems to have walked out of a self-help book or a sports ad, but after an epic journey, he is finally knocking at the gates of power, ready to "Just do it" — whatever "it" is. Khan has politicized a whole generation, only to deliver it into servitude to Pakistan's old establishment.

Mohammed Hanif (@mohammedhanif) is the author of the novels "A Case of Exploding Mangoes" and "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti," and the librettist for the opera "Bhutto."

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Zero Tariffs? There's A Precedent (Lane, WSJ)

If Trump is serious about free and fair trade, he should follow the example of Caterpillar in 1988.

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Bill Lane

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Trump's Foreign Policy Is Perfectly Coherent (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

President Trump's foreign policy is perfectly coherent — so coherent, in fact, that we could give it a name: pure bilateralism.

Trump's foreign policy doctrine has been staring us in the face so plainly that we've overlooked it. Here's my unifying theory: He didn't get out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal because he disagreed with this or that detail of the agreements. He hasn't started up deals with Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin and sought to force Xi Jinping to the bargaining table because he has refined views of what he seeks. He got out of the former deals because they were multilateral; he's working on the latter deals because they are bilateral.

In an interview with CNBC last week, Trump said: "I'm different than other [presidents]. I'm a dealmaker. I've made deals all my life. I do really well. I make great deals."

We've heard that dealmaker language plenty, but we haven't fully registered its content.

Less than seeking to disrupt the old order because he has a considered view about it, apparently Trump seeks a global order that turns around him personally, where global politics is conducted as a series of deals with Donald Trump.

Tony Abbott, former prime minister of Australia, almost saw to the bottom of things in a recent speech published in the Wall Street Journal. Abbott wrote, "What Mr. Trump is making clear . . . is what should always have been screamingly obvious: that each nation's safety now rests in its own hands far more than in anyone else's." Such a view forces a pivot from cooperative multilateralism to pure bilateralism.

Abbott didn't explicitly point out this doctrine of bilateralism but seems to have intuited it. He focused considerable attention on what sort of bilateral relationship Australia should undertake with the United States. Abbott wrote: "Being America's partner, as well as its friend, is even more important now, given Mr. Trump's obsession with reciprocity."

Then Abbott made a mistake, proposing what we might think of as the Michael Cohen doctrine of foreign policy: total loyalty. "In my judgment, Australia should have upgraded its Iraq mission to 'advise, assist and accompany' as soon as America did, and extended it into Syria. Australia should have mounted freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea. And Australia should have not only welcomed the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem but moved ours, too." Cohen's current troubles tell where such total loyalty leads.

Across his business career, Trump sought to use his assets to consolidate his personal power and influence through dealmaking. He rode even the bankruptcy of his casinos into financial advantage and from their ruins drew resources that helped him redefine his development business and add to it a television career.

The important thing to recognize about Trump's foreign policy agenda — his sequential, bilateral dealmaking — is that we, the American people, with our mammoth consumer market, are now his most valuable asset. Other countries want access to us; this is the ace in Trump's hand. Like his erstwhile casinos, we're a stake he can put on the dealmaking table.

Recognizing this helps make sense of how his domestic policy and foreign policy align. He cuts taxes at home; the economy revs up. Voilà, the world's biggest market is even

hotter, and now he can brandish the asset in trade fights to maximal effect. Many have tried to tease out why Trump should follow up his tax cuts, meant to help small businesses, with tariffs that punish many of those same people. That problem disappears when one recognizes that Trump cares about his asset — "the American people" — in a similar way to how he cared about his casinos.

He himself said this, in less coherent language, in his CNBC interview. Given "all this work that we are putting in to the economy," he asserted, the economy is "maybe as good as it's ever been ever." As a result, he said, in reference to his tariffs, "This is the time." He continued, "You know the expression 'We're playing with the bank's money,' right?"

The purpose of Trump's bilateralist foreign policy is not some overarching vision about world peace or democracy's role in global order. The purpose is simply to maximize Trump's personal power, to make him personally great, by proving his dealmaking prowess and making himself necessary to the world's economy. I think that he himself believes that when he is great on his own terms, America is great. That, with him in the White House, his interest is the national interest.

But what about for us? Is pure bilateralism good for the American people? Is Trump's interest the same as the national interest? A thousand times no. A democratic republic cannot afford to become dependent on the bilateral relationships a single individual has with the other countries of the world. We need to secure and preserve institutional relationships, both multilateral and bilateral, that we the people can control and steer over time through temporary representatives.

Trump is not merely disrupting NATO and other multilateral relationships. He is disrupting the institutional power, durability and sovereignty of the American people.

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STATE DEPARTMENT

An AR-15 Made At Home? With 3D Printing, 'The Downloadable Gun' Becomes Available August 1 (Hafner, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Josh Hafner

Americans will soon be able to make 3D-printed guns from their home, widening the door to do-it-yourself versions of firearms including the AR-15 — the gun of choice in American mass shootings — that are untraceable with no background check required.

A settlement earlier this year between the State Department and Texas-based Defense Distributed will let the nonprofit release blueprints for guns online starting Aug. 1, a development hailed by the group as the death of gun control in the United States.

"The age of the downloadable gun begins," Defense Distributed stated on its site. Its founder, Cody Wilson, tweeted a photograph of a grave marked "American gun control."

The plans freely available next month put firearms clicks away from anyone with the right machine and materials. That reality has startled gun control advocates, who say it makes untraceable firearms all the more available.

For Wilson, August marks the end of a years-long legal battle: He designed a 3D-printable plastic pistol, the "Liberator .380," in 2012 and put the plans online. It was downloaded more than 100,000 times before federal officials blocked his site, citing international export law.

A lawsuit from Wilson followed. The State Department settled in June.

The Second Amendment Foundation, a nonprofit that partnered with Wilson in the lawsuit, put out a statement calling the settlement "a devastating blow to the gun prohibition lobby."

Assembling guns at home isn't new. It can be done legally, too, provided the made-at-home gun isn't sold. Defense Distributed already sells parts that let users build their own untraceable firearms, known as "ghost guns" for their lack of serial numbers.

"Legally manufacture unserialized rifles and pistols in the comfort and privacy of home," one product's description states.

David Chipman, who worked 25 years as an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, told Vice News that the homemade guns favored by hobbyists have since become popular with criminals.

"Now, criminals have started using ghost guns as a way to circumvent assault weapon regulations," said Chipman, now an adviser to the gun control advocacy group Giffords. "I imagine that people will also start printing guns to get around laws."

Gun plans previewed on Defense Distributed's website feature the Liberator pistol along with an AR-15 and a VZ-58, a Czechoslovakian assault rifle.

The printers needed to make the guns can cost from \$5,000 to \$600,000, according to Vice News. The quality of plastic matters, too: An early design printed by federal agents

shattered after one shot. A second gun, made from a higher grade resin, stayed intact.

William Bones, the chief of police in Boise, Idaho, told the Idaho Statesman that law enforcement agencies have followed developments in 3D-printed guns for "quite a while now."

"Measures are needed to ensure these weapons are safely built and to prevent access by children or those prohibited from owning a firearm," Bones told the newspaper.

"Hopefully we see some safe and responsible legislation soon as well as manufacturers taking measure to prevent access which might lead to tragedy."

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TRADE

EU Counts On Top Official To Try To Calm U.S. Trade Fight (Pop, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Valentina Pop

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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World Media Wrestles With Broader Impact Of Escalating U.S.-China Trade War (Boylan, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dan Boylan

The escalating trade war between the U.S. and China continues stirring deep sentiments across the globe, including claims from Chinese media that Beijing has intentionally greeted Washington's latest threat of more tariffs — with silence.

On Monday and over the weekend, editorialists and columnists wrestled with the broader geopolitical impact to the possibility that President Donald Trump alters China's bullish trade practices at the expense of his political base.

In the Middle East, Al Jazeera's leading opinion on the fast-moving issue is headlined, "Will Trump's tariffs push the EU [European Union] and China closer together?"

J. Berkshire Miller, a fellow on East Asia for the EastWest Institute, notes that last week, while Mr. Trump met with Russian President Vladimir Putin — key EU and Chinese officials gathered for a two-day summit in Beijing.

There, they pledged to deepen their relationship “against the backdrop of increasing uncertainty in their relationship with the United States.”

Mr. Miller, however, concludes that while the Trump administration’s approach to trade has been abrasive, the EU remains deeply wary of Chinese trade policy and practices and “is far from making a decision on elevating disagreements with Washington into something larger or overtly siding with Beijing in a united bloc to oppose the moves.”

From Canada, Toronto Star columnist Heather Mallick writes on Monday that “Trump tariffs are a ticking bomb for numbed Americans” and delves in what she sees as a dangerous game that the White House is playing with the economics of Mr. Trump’s working-class political base.

Earlier this month Trump administration trade representatives announced plans to target a possible \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods with tariffs — just days after Beijing and Washington levied tit-for-tat tariffs of \$34 billion on each other’s goods. More recently, Mr. Trump has said more than \$500 billion — or almost the entire value of Chinese goods shipped to America last year — could be targeted in the near future.

Mr. Trump has long demanded that China reform its hard-line trade negotiating tactics and curtail the theft of American technology and intellectual property.

Ms. Mallick explores a more grass-roots angle, contending that U.S.-China trade has allowed Americans “to shop cheaply at Walmart and buy in bulk at Costco” adding that both are “clogged” with Chinese goods.

“If tariffs damaged this system, Americans would march on Washington, D.C. with hammers,” Mr. Mallick writes. “No, those come from China. Make that assault rifles.”

Over the weekend, the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong’s leading English language paper, headlined its lead opinion, “Why is Beijing unusually muted since Donald Trump’s latest US\$500 billion trade war threat?”

Writer Sidney Leng notes that the Chinese state media, “from the official Xinhua news agency to Global Times” did not cover Mr. Trump’s latest threat. He adds that over the weekend, neither the Chinese Commerce Ministry nor the Foreign Ministry issued any statements on the subject.

“The silence in Beijing is unusual,” he writes, “but comes after Chinese media were told not to ‘over-report’ the trade war, to avoid spreading panic.”

Mr. Leng also suggests that Beijing might simply have “nothing to add to its previous statements” which have argued that “a trade war is bad for everyone”.

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Tariffs Trim A Factory’s Profit, But Loyalty To Trump Endures (Schwartz, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Nelson D. Schwartz

You might think that managers and workers at Banner Metals would be up in arms over the Trump administration’s trade policies. After all, tariffs on imported steel and aluminum have pushed raw-material prices up and margins down, forcing the company to delay plans to purchase a new \$1 million cutting machine and hire two new employees to operate it.

But the reaction at the plant is based on more than self-interest. “I’m not looking at what’s best for Banner right now,” said Bronson Jones, a part-owner of the company and its chief executive. “I’m looking at what’s best for the national economy. The U.S. has been taken advantage of for too long.”

That proposition, tracing a volatile political fault line, is frequently encountered on the factory floor here, a few miles from this prosperous city’s gleaming downtown.

Casey Jackson, a maintenance technician, said he would support the tariffs even if they cost him personally. “If it comes out of my paycheck, so be it,” he said. “You got to look at the big picture. That tiny bit of sacrifice we make will create jobs.”

While the manufacturing sector is on the upswing nationally — factories have added 344,000 jobs since the beginning of 2017 — there is an abiding sense of siege among factory workers and executives alike, of having been shortchanged in the trade equation.

Mr. Trump, in departing from the traditional Republican embrace of free trade, struck a chord in 2016, carrying this battleground state by eight percentage points. And the workers on the factory floor underscore his reservoir of blue-collar support — even as he pursues a trade conflict in which key American industrial sectors could be hit. For them, there is still a larger wrong that must be righted.

Divisions on the issue remain stark. In a poll conducted by SurveyMonkey for The New York Times in early July, 76 percent of Republicans supported the metal tariffs, while 79 percent of Democrats opposed them. Nearly half of workers with a high school diploma or some college said they approved of the tariffs, compared with 39 percent of college-educated workers.

As Mr. Jackson, a 34-year-old Air Force veteran, sees it, the current trade war recalls past military conflicts. “We had victory gardens in World War II,” he said during a break

between shifts, which run from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and then from 4:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. “I know the tariffs have an impact on us, but I don’t think it was a mistake.”

Besides the 20 to 25 percent increase in raw material prices in recent months, Mr. Jones has found himself scrambling to line up shipments of the steel and aluminum that Banner’s two-story-tall stamping machines turn into parts for aircraft brakes and seats. Bigger manufacturers have been hoarding metal supplies, he said, ordering larger amounts to get ahead of rising prices and leaving smaller firms like Banner at a disadvantage.

“We were accustomed to four weeks’ lead time, but now it can be as long as 16 to 20 weeks,” he said. In response, Banner has been flying in steel from an Austrian supplier, an expensive proposition when the price of airfreight and the new tariffs are taken into account.

With about 70 percent of Banner’s business coming from the aerospace industry, Mr. Jones can’t easily switch metal suppliers. Anything going into an airplane has to be carefully certified beforehand, restricting Banner’s options when raw material is delayed.

“With aerospace, you can’t pick up and move it,” Mr. Jones said.

Mr. Jones had planned to buy a laser cutting apparatus that would be able to do some production currently outsourced, but pressure on profit margins forced him to postpone the order in May. He even visited the manufacturer while the machine was under construction and had a spot picked out for it at the plant.

“It was like going to see your new car in the showroom,” he said. “But with steel prices up, we could see the writing on the wall.”

Nevertheless, while Mr. Jones isn’t always comfortable with what the president may say or put on Twitter, he likes the overall strategy.

“He’s going for the jugular, which is typical Trump style,” he said. “I’m not used to it, and it’s not a presidential style we are accustomed to. But he’s the only president who’s taken a significant stance on trade, and we need a brash approach.”

The scope of the trade tensions has been widening — 25 percent tariffs on imported steel went into effect this spring, and the White House imposed duties on hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of Chinese imports this month. The Commerce Department has also been examining whether imports of foreign cars pose a national security threat, a prelude to protectionist steps in the auto industry.

The steel tariffs have resulted in the creation of some new jobs. After going cold in 2015, for example, the blast furnaces

are restarting at U.S. Steel’s plant in Granite City, Ill., in large part because of higher prices for the tubular steel churned out there.

But a vast majority of economists argue that over all, tariffs cost more jobs than they create. And there are many more metal consumers out there, like Banner, than metal producers like U.S. Steel.

Despite the perception of an uneven playing field in trade, Banner has been thriving.

Founded in 1921 as a tool-and-die producer, the company has added eight workers in the last couple of years, bringing its work force to 38. Demand from customers like Boeing, Airbus and United Technologies has been strong.

“We do parts for everything that flies,” said Rick Sayre, Banner’s vice president for engineering. “It’s been a good run.”

Even though manufacturing accounts for only 8.5 percent of the nation’s work force, compared with 15 percent a quarter-century ago, it continues to offer opportunity at plants like Banner’s.

Machine operators earn \$15 to \$20 an hour, and experienced tool-and-die makers can earn twice that. There are also avenues for advancement — Mr. Jones himself started in the shipping department at Banner 24 years ago, earning \$8 an hour as a quality-assurance inspector. He eventually rose into management and bought the company with two partners in 2013.

“We believe in promoting from within, and we encourage people to go back to college,” he said. In some cases, Banner will pay for additional training for employees.

Even as the talk of a trade war has intensified, and new duties go into effect, Mr. Jones said he saw the Trump administration’s moves as part of a negotiating strategy, not a fundamental move away from free trade, which he said he supported.

“I don’t think hundreds of billions in tariffs are going into effect with other countries, but it sure gets their attention,” he said. “I don’t think it will all stick, and they’ll meet in the middle. It’s short-term pain for long-term gain.”

The results of the survey for The Times echoed Mr. Jones’s analysis. Among Americans who said they approved of the tariffs, a third said they thought Mr. Trump’s approach to trade would be “helpful in the long term but harmful in the short term.”

Mr. Sayre concurred — with one caveat. “I never cared much for the way Trump does it, but he’s doing O.K. as far as I’m

concerned," he said. What exactly doesn't he like? "The way he bullies everybody and bends the truth," Mr. Sayre said.

Back on the factory floor, Mr. Jackson said he was comfortable with the president's game plan. "It's aggressive, it's tough, and he won't back down," Mr. Jackson said. "Using trade as a bargaining chip will help someone else put food on the table."

James Ford, another hourly employee, who is a production supervisor, jumped into the conversation. "I like that Trump doesn't sugarcoat anything," he said. "People get offended very easily by somebody being direct."

Other workers, like Todd Grizzle, a 25-year-old maintenance technician, said he could see both sides of the tariff debate. But his memories of the closing of Columbus Casting on the city's South Side are still fresh.

Once the nation's largest foundry, the century-old complex employed 800 people when it filed for bankruptcy in 2016. "There was a flood of people looking for work," Mr. Grizzle said.

The red-brick factory, which looked like something out of Dickens and covers 90 acres, is being demolished. The lesson that Mr. Grizzle said he had learned was that American jobs needed to be protected.

"I like the idea of the U.S. having allies," he said. "But if this can bring more jobs back to America, that's a good thing."

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Mnuchin Firm On Trump's Tough Trade Approach (Puglie, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Frederic Puglie

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin doubled down on the Trump administration's tough talk on trade over the weekend even as his international counterparts warned U.S. tariffs could stunt global growth and usher in a new era of job-killing protectionism.

In a *deja vu* of previous summits, Mr. Mnuchin found few allies at the two-day meeting of Group of 20 finance ministers and central bankers, many of whom openly labeled the recent tit-for-tat over tariffs U.S.-wrought "trade wars."

But Mr. Mnuchin declined to soften President Trump's thunder, which on Friday included the threat of an additional \$500 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods, noting he had backed Mr. Trump's hard-line stance from the get-go.

"I worked with him during the campaign, so I'm not new to any of these economic issues; I helped develop these

economic issues." Mr. Mnuchin told The Washington Times. "From my first meeting at the G-20 ... I've tried to emphasize that this is about making sure that we have free and fair, two-way trade."

Economic analysts say Mr. Mnuchin did ease some fears sparked by his boss' tweets over the weekend on another front, denying the U.S. government wants a weaker dollar to boost exports and softening Mr. Trump's criticism that China and other major trading partners are manipulating their currencies to help their own exporters.

The U.S. treasury secretary said anyone surprised by Mr. Trump's combative stance hasn't been paying attention.

China, Mr. Mnuchin insisted, is fully aware of U.S. demands to let American companies compete freely and expand U.S. exports to slash the current \$370 billion trade deficit. But with his Chinese counterpart a no-show in Buenos Aires, the showdown quickly shifted to the brewing threat of a second trade war — with Europe.

Still angry over steel and aluminum tariffs and fearing possible duties on their car makers, European officials here toggled between indignation, threats of retaliation and — albeit flimsy — optimism that talks between Mr. Trump and European Union President Jean-Claude Juncker this week may help turn things around.

Mr. Juncker's economics commissioner, Pierre Moscovici, on Sunday tried to walk back comments by French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, who had warned that Europe would "refuse to negotiate [with Washington] with a gun to the head."

"We are of course ready to respond firmly; it's not a question of a gun, but we are prepared," Mr. Moscovici said. "But we're also there to build bridges, and we hope that this meeting, which is — I can see that — [eagerly] awaited by our American partners, will be the beginning of something."

Between the lines, however, the Europeans gathered here acknowledged that the breakdown of U.S.-China trade talks did not play in their favor, but Mr. Moscovici warned that the U.S. economy, too, was likely take a big blow in an escalating trade war.

"Protectionism is good for no one, and trade wars are not easy, contrary to what [Mr. Trump] said," he said. "They create no winners, only casualties."

But Mr. Mnuchin, whom many here see as a relatively moderate voice on Mr. Trump's economic policy team, was not backing down here. He insisted that, save for some "micro impacts" on small, specific markets, the U.S. economy has not and will not suffer a major hit if a trade war heats up.

"If you're looking at lobsters in Maine, or you're looking at bourbon in Kentucky, or you're looking at soybeans, there are clearly markets that are being followed," he said. "On a macro basis, we don't see yet any impact on the economy of the tariffs."

And despite Mr. Trump's aggressive move, the pull of the U.S. economy continued to be potent, Mr. Mnuchin observed.

"If requests for meetings is related to popularity," he said in the interview, "I'm pretty popular here."

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GLOBAL ISSUES

Defense Lawyer: Attorney General Sessions Objected To 9/11 Trial Plea Deal (Rosenberg, MH)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Miami Herald

By Carol Rosenberg

Attorney General Jeff Sessions called Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis in October to protest exploratory talks about a plea deal in the 9/11 case that would have taken the death penalty off the table, according to an investigation by defense attorneys who want a military judge to order both men to testify at the war court.

At issue is Mattis' Feb. 5 firing of the overseer of military commissions, Harvey Rishikof, at a time when he had been secretly exploring the possibility of guilty pleas to resolve the terror trial. Pretrial hearings continue this week in the case that started with the May 2012 arraignment of alleged plot mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed and four alleged accomplices.

Nearly 3,000 people died on Sept. 11, 2001 when 19 men seized four commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center, Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field. Within 20 months, the United States had seized the five men accused of directing, training or helping the hijackers with travel and finances. The CIA held and interrogated them for years in the spy agency's secret overseas prisons, complicating the path to trial.

Now, defense attorneys argue that Trump administration meddling in the guilty-plea negotiations merits, if not dismissing the case entirely, then making it a non-capital trial. Mattis and his acting general counsel, William Castle, have earlier said in affidavits that they fired Rishikof and his legal adviser, Gary Brown, for failure to follow proper Pentagon channels, a taboo in a military culture led by Mattis, a retired Marine general. SIGN UP

But the alternative explanation involving the plea deal merits open-court testimony from Sessions, Mattis and Castle, military justice expert Eugene Fidell said in an interview.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis during a hearing on Capitol Hill on April 26, 2018.

"There's certainly enough there that a thorough evidentiary hearing has to be conducted," said Fidell, who teaches at Yale law school. "If you're going to preserve the integrity of the system, and have any hope of fostering public confidence in the military commissions system, this has to be aired in a full way on the record."

Sessions needs to answer two key questions, Fidell said: "How did he find out about discussions of a possible plea deal — and did he talk to the White House?"

Defense attorney Jay Connell describes the behind-the-scenes machinations in a 22-page document obtained by McClatchy that justifies the need for a series of in-court witnesses on the question of meddling, or unlawful influence, as it is known at the war court.

They include Mattis, Deputy Secretary Patrick Shanahan, Castle, Rishikof, Brown, Sessions, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, deputy general counsel Ryan Newman, and U.S. Southern Command commander Adm. Kurt Tidd.

Harvey Rishikof moderating a Sept. 16, 2014, Debate on War and the Constitution.

Also sought is ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero. The document discloses for the first time that Romero unsuccessfully sought to negotiate a plea deal with the White House during the Obama administration.

The Guantánamo war court judiciary is meant to be independent of politics. Mattis appointed Rishikof, a civilian attorney, to serve as the top authority at military commissions, called the Convening Authority, on April 4, 2017 then fired him in February 2018. The Convening Authority has the power to approve or dismiss cases and make or approve plea deals, if the prosecutor proposes them.

But Connell writes in his request for a judicial order to question Castle about an Oct. 16, 2017 meeting with the top two war court officials, Rishikof and Brown. In that meeting, Connell writes, the men discussed a call earlier that month from Sessions to "Secretary Mattis to voice his objections to potential plea deals in the 9/11 case." The call "interrupted a meeting" that Mattis was having with "senior military officers," the document says.

At the Justice Department, Sessions' spokeswoman, Sarah Isgur Flores, said she could not confirm the details but said

that the attorney general "certainly speaks with other Cabinet members regularly, Secretary Mattis included."

The spokeswoman declined to say whether Sessions met with Sept. 11 families or heard from the White House prior to phoning Mattis about the plea discussions.

Pentagon spokeswoman Navy Cmdr. Sarah Higgins declined comment, citing the Department of Defense's "longstanding practice not to comment on matters in litigation."

She specifically declined to confirm that the phone call happened, or say who Mattis was meeting with at the time of the call. On a question of whether this kind of involvement in the hybrid military-federal military commissions by the attorney general would be appropriate, she replied: "As always, the Department [of Defense] is committed to ensuring military commissions achieve a just resolution of all referred cases."

Connell, who headed up the investigation, told McClatchy the Department of Justice apparently found out about ongoing discussions because some defense attorneys wanted assurances that, if their clients pleaded guilty, the captives could serve their sentences at Guantánamo not a SuperMax federal prison in the United States.

Rishikof had been in touch with a deputy of Sessions to discuss whether such assurances were possible, Connell said.

The transfer of any Guantánamo detainee to U.S. soil for any purpose is currently prohibited by federal law.

A soon-to-retire Pentagon bureaucrat, Defense Logistics Agency General Counsel Jim Coyne, has been filling the job of Convening Authority on an interim basis.

This effort by the 9/11 defense lawyers is part of a long series of so-far unsuccessful efforts to dismiss or downgrade the capital case due to alleged political meddling across different administrations.

- In May, Mohammed's lawyers argued that President Donald Trump's incendiary tweets on military justice tainted the 9/11 trial, which has no start date. The judge, Army Col. James L. Pohl, has yet to rule.

- In 2016, the judge ruled that remarks by political leaders stretching back to the George W. Bush presidency did not constitute unlawful influence but said that lawyers will be allowed to more liberally scrutinize who is chosen for the jury of U.S. military officers.

- In 2015, Pohl found that a Pentagon order for war court judges to live at Guantánamo until the terror trials were over raised the specter of unlawful influence. He halted the pretrial hearings, and the move-in order was withdrawn.

McClatchy obtained the document seeking Sessions' and Mattis testimony in advance of a July 23-27 pretrial hearing in the case, which is expected to focus in part on limitations on defense attorneys in seeing original case evidence and independently investigating the CIA. Another unlawful influence motion is also on the docket brought by Mohammed's lawyers. That one alleges that, since CIA Director Gina Haspel is the ultimate decider on what Black Site evidence remains classified, the trial is tainted by her previous involvement in the secret prison network.

Judge Pohl had initially agreed to a defense request to take testimony from Rishikof and Castle. He reversed himself June 21, at the request of prosecutors who said paperwork provided the defense lawyers surrounding Rishikof's management objectives eliminated the need for live testimony.

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Drug-Fuelled HIV Surge Raises Concerns At AIDS Meeting (Roux, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Mariëtte Le Roux

Concerns over an HIV surge in countries where strict laws cause drug users to share virus-laced needles, were raised Monday at a world AIDS assembly in Amsterdam.

Some 15,000 delegates – researchers, campaigners, activists and people living with the AIDS-causing virus – gathered for a five-day war council amid dire warnings that complacency and a shortage of funds may yet cause AIDS to spiral out of control.

While reviewing the latest science and policy developments, the 22nd International AIDS conference is also seeking to harness the star power of celebrity activists such as singer Conchita Wurst to bolster a battle that experts warn is losing ground in some parts of the world.

The 2014 Eurovision song winner, an Austrian drag queen who announced in April she was HIV-positive, used the opening ceremony to question why millions of people still have no access to life-saving drugs.

"How long will it take until we make our research and affordable therapies accessible to every single human who needs it?" she asked.

"I would like to know why medical treatment advances that I have access to are still not available to so many affected."

Other celebrities from actress Charlize Theron and pop star Elton John to Britain's Prince Harry will pick up the call for action at the conference on Tuesday.

With a record 36.9 million people now living with HIV, experts warn that complacency, and a shortage of billions of dollars, risked undoing, even reversing, many hard-won gains.

"In Eastern Europe and Central Asia new infections have increased 30 percent since 2010," International AIDS Society (IAS) president Linda-Gail Bekker said.

It was, she said, "the only region in the world where HIV is rapidly increasing, in large part related to injecting drug use."

A UNAIDS report last week said that new HIV infections, while down overall, were rising in about 50 countries.

- Too slow -

"Despite all the remarkable advances that have been made, progress on ending AIDS is still slow," said Tedros Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization.

And he warned the world "will not" meet UN 2020 targets on HIV/AIDS, "because there are too many places in the world where people don't get prevention and treatment services they need."

Spread mainly through sex and blood contact, the immune-system attacking HIV virus has infected nearly 80 million people since the early 1980s.

More than 35 million have died.

"When I was born 20 years ago with HIV, the landscape of the epidemic looked very different to what it does now," said Mercy Ngulube, a youth activist attending the conference.

"It is so wonderful to be able to live a life where I don't have to wake up and wonder if we have the tools to fight HIV. But it is also sad to live a life where I know that we have the tools and I know that people cannot access them."

According to UNAIDS, some 1.8 million people were newly infected with AIDS last year.

- 'No' to war on drugs -

This is partly due to the criminalisation of injecting drugs, particularly heroin, in many countries.

Fear forces users onto the fringes of society and puts them at risk of infection by sharing soiled needles, then passing the virus on to their sexual partners.

"Close to half – more than 45 percent of all new HIV infections in the world are in... the most affected and hard to reach groups, and that of course includes people who use drugs," said Chris Beyrer, director of the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at John Hopkins University.

The meeting saw an address by UNAIDS head Michel Sidibe interrupted by women protesting what they called the "patriarchy machine."

Sidibe faces calls for his resignation over complaints that he shielded a deputy from sexual harassment claims and attacked whistleblowers.

"Michel, we call on you to step away from the scripted and rehearsed propaganda machine and for once look us in the face... and speak the truth," one woman shouted.

Sidibe assured the group saying "I heard you," but added there must be no division in the fight against AIDS.

"We have come so far, but we have miles to go," he said.

The conference paid tribute to six IAS colleagues who died when Malaysian Airlines MH17, on its way to the 2014 AIDS conference in Melbourne, was shot down.

"The world continues to seek justice for what happened on that dreadful day," conference chairman Peter Reiss said.

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Ebola Infects Woman's Husband, Sons, A Year After She Recovered: Study (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

A woman who survived Ebola in July 2014 may have infected her husband and two sons more than a year later, said a study Tuesday, highlighting the need for "continued surveillance".

The seeming virus "flare-up" killed one of the boys, a 15-year-old, according to research findings published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases medical journal.

The boy tested positive for Ebola in Monrovia, Liberia, on November 19, 2015, and died four days later, it said.

His father and eight-year-old brother also tested positive for Ebola RNA – molecules that convey DNA instructions – and experienced symptoms such as tiredness, headache and fever. Both recovered.

The mother was also tested but had no traces of Ebola RNA, said the research team.

However, she carried Ebola antibodies, indicating she had previously been infected and that her body had launched an immune response to fight off the virus.

Further tests "suggested that she survived an acute Ebola virus infection in July 2014," said a press statement.

The virus appears to have "re-emerged" after the woman gave birth to a fourth son, "making the infection flare up in

October 2015, then transmitting the virus to her family," it added.

Liberia was declared free of human-to-human Ebola virus transmission in May 2015.

The virus carried by the father and two sons appears to have been a "continuation" of the 2014 outbreak, when the mother was infected while taking care of her brother who died of Ebola.

The couple's baby boy also had Ebola antibodies, which he likely got through his mother's milk, the researchers said.

This was the first known case of transmission from a "persistently infected" Ebola survivor, the team reported.

It was already known that the virus, which caused a major outbreak in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea in 2013-15 in which more than 11,300 people died, can persist for many months in semen, in the eye, and in breast milk of women infected while pregnant.

The World Health Organization has said that transmission by people who beat infection is "rare".

"Exactly how the virus was passed from family member to family member remains unclear, but the authors suggest it could be close physical contact or contact with body fluids," said the journal statement.

Ebola was first identified in what was then Zaire – now the Democratic Republic of Congo – in 1976.

Since then, there have been several outbreaks, of which the West African outbreak was the deadliest by far.

Often contracted from eating infected bushmeat, the virus can be transmitted from person to person via the blood, certain body fluids, or organs of an infected or recently deceased person.

Transfer can happen by touching a sick or dead person, and likely also sexual intercourse, research has shown.

On average, the virus kills about half of the people it infects.

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For The First Time, A Female Ebola Survivor Infects Others (McNeil, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Donald G. McNeil Jr.

For the first time, scientists have found evidence that a woman can harbor the Ebola virus for more than a year and then infect others.

The discovery involved transmission within a Liberian family in the closing days of the West African epidemic that lasted

from December 2014 to mid-2016. More than 28,600 people were infected and 11,325 died.

The episode raises new medical questions: Scientists do not know how the virus hid inside the woman for 13 months before re-emerging in lethal form.

However, because she fell ill soon after giving birth, experts believe the immune suppression that normally occurs in pregnancy may have triggered a relapse.

The case, published Monday by Lancet Infectious Diseases, also worries experts because fear of Ebola survivors and discrimination against them persists in Africa, and the notion that a female survivor can pass on the virus could worsen that.

In the past, although bits of virus have been found in the breast milk and spinal fluid of women who recover, only male survivors have been shown to infect anyone. Those transmissions were through sex — the virus is known to persist in semen for two years.

The family cluster came to light in November 2015, six months after Liberia had declared its outbreak over — prematurely, it turned out.

A 15-year-old boy, the woman's oldest son, was hospitalized vomiting blood. He tested positive for Ebola and, despite intensive treatment, died 10 days after his symptoms first appeared.

As soon as he tested positive, contact-tracers brought his whole family, including his 33-year-old mother, his 40-year-old father and his three younger brothers, aged 8, 5 and two months in for observation and testing.

The family also became the first participants in a clinical trial of a new Ebola vaccine, said Dr. Emily Kainne Dokubo, an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who was then the leader of the agency's Ebola response in Liberia and is the lead author of the Lancet study.

All 120 people with any recent contact with the family were vaccinated, she said. None fell ill, and that helped prove the Merck vaccine works.

This year, the vaccine was used to defeat the most recent Ebola outbreak, which took place in the Democratic Republic of Congo. About 3,200 people were vaccinated, and new cases faded out after only about three months. On Tuesday, the director-general of the World Health Organization will officially declare it over.

In Liberia, after the 15-year-old died, blood tests showed that his father and 8-year-old brother had Ebola. With treatment, both recovered.

The 5-year-old apparently was never infected.

Neither the mother nor the new baby had virus in their blood but, rather mysteriously, both had antibodies against it. That suggested the mother had had an earlier infection and that the baby had absorbed protective antibodies through breastfeeding.

Dr. Dokubo described what she and her C.D.C. colleagues believe happened:

In July, 2014, soon after Ebola first reached Liberia from Guinea, the mother had cared for her brother, a nurse's aide dying of an unknown illness. She was pregnant; she soon fell ill and miscarried, but slowly recovered.

Neither she nor her brother went to one of the new Ebola treatment units then being set up, so they never had Ebola tests.

"That was not uncommon, with all the stigma and fear at the time," Dr. Dokubo said.

Thirteen months later, in September, 2015, she gave birth to a healthy boy.

Shortly afterward, in October, she was hospitalized with fatigue, shortness of breath and swollen legs. Liberia had been declared Ebola-free in May, so she was not tested for it. Instead, she was treated for malaria and given blood transfusions because she was anemic, and sent home after three days. (The hospital tested its stored blood and none had Ebola virus or antibodies, the study said.)

But pregnancy lowers mothers' immune systems to protect fetuses from rejection, and Dr. Dokubo said pregnancy had probably unleashed a hidden reservoir of dormant virus within the woman; tests did not establish where that reservoir might be.

There was no evidence of sexual transmission; the woman's husband and two elder sons probably became infected while caring for her, Dr. Dokubo said.

Although the case is rare and highly unusual among the thousands of Ebola survivors in West Africa, it means that countries cannot become complacent even when outbreaks seem to be over, Dr. Dokubo said.

Also, she added, survivors must be tested for Ebola if they fall ill, even if they lack common Ebola symptoms.

In an editorial accompanying the Lancet article, Lorenzo Subissi, an Ebola expert at Sciensano, Belgium's public health institute, said the new study "could lead to additional stigma around survivors."

Survivors are often driven out of their villages or neighborhoods because people fear they may be infectious, so Dr. Subissi suggested that vaccination be used both to

stop outbreaks and to calm the fears that lead to stigmatization and abuse of survivors.

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Doctors: Woman Likely Spread Ebola A Year After Infection (Cheng, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Maria Cheng

A Liberian woman who probably caught Ebola in 2014 may have infected three relatives a year after she first fell sick, doctors reported in a study published Monday.

There have been previous instances of men spreading Ebola to women via sexual transmission — the virus can survive in semen for more than a year — but the new case is the first time scientists have suggested that Ebola was spread from a woman after such a prolonged period.

The rare possibility of Ebola spreading long after infection highlights the importance of monitoring survivors, especially with the imminent end of the most recent flare-up of the disease in Congo. That country's latest outbreak, announced in May, has so far recorded 38 confirmed cases, including 14 deaths. It is due to be declared contained on Wednesday, which will mark 42 days, or two incubation periods, since the last case was recorded.

"The Ebola virus hides in places where it can escape the antibodies from a body's immune system, so there is a need for vigilance," said Dr. David Heymann, a professor of infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who was not linked to the new research.

The unusual cluster of cases in Liberia was identified after the woman's 15-year-old son was diagnosed with Ebola in November 2015. Scientists then tested the rest of his family: the woman, her husband and their three younger sons.

The 15-year-old died a few days later. The father and an 8-year-old boy were positive for Ebola, but both recovered. The couple's 5-year-old son wasn't infected.

Doctors found Ebola antibodies in the mother, her breast milk and her 2-month-old baby, suggesting a previous infection and the possibility she passed on protection to her infant son through breastfeeding.

Researchers reported genetic similarities between the viruses taken from the father, the two boys and the strain circulating during the 2014-15 outbreak across Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, which ultimately killed more than 11,000 people in the biggest Ebola epidemic in history.

Scientists discovered the woman had cared for her brother in July 2014, who died after suffering Ebola-like symptoms but

before being tested for the disease. The woman later experienced a similar illness, but never sought care.

Several weeks after giving birth to a baby in September 2015, the woman developed problems including fatigue and breathing difficulties. Doctors say that because pregnancy lowers the body's immune defenses, that may have allowed for the Ebola virus to re-emerge.

"The suspicious illness she had following delivery may have been a re-activation of Ebola, but we have no confirmatory tests," said Dr. Emily Kainne Dokubo, who led the Ebola response in Liberia for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the study's lead author.

Dokubo said it was possible the woman infected her husband and two older sons with Ebola when they took care of her — the disease is normally spread through contact with an infected patient's blood or other bodily fluids. The case report was published online Monday in the journal Lancet.

"There isn't complete evidence to reconstruct what happened, but this is the most likely scenario," said Lorenzo Subissi, an epidemiologist at Sciensano, a Belgian research institute, who was not part of the study.

Dokubo said such cases of Ebola re-emergence are exceptional, with only two reported instances: a Scottish nurse who developed meningitis caused by Ebola hidden in her brain and an American physician who had lingering virus in his eye. In those two cases, the virus did not spread any further.

"We don't want there to be a sense of complacency with people thinking that just because the outbreak is over, there's nothing more to be done," Dokubo said. "There is a risk of viral persistence and people should seek care immediately so that we can pick up any suspicious cases right away and stop a larger outbreak."

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Ebola In Survivor's Family Shows Deadly Virus's Lasting Effects (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

More than four years after the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, scientists are still uncovering sobering new information about the lasting effects of the virus on survivors.

A study published Monday describes a Liberian woman, 33, who survived an Ebola infection during the 2014-2015 epidemic and then, one year later, apparently infected her

husband and two of their sons. One son, 15, died. The husband, 40, and other son, 8, recovered.

The study, in the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal, is the first indication of transmission from a female Ebola survivor, highlighting the continued risk for a resurgence of cases and the potential for large-scale outbreaks long after there is no longer active disease spread.

The epidemic in West Africa sickened more than 28,000 people, including more than 11,000 who died across Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. A few cases have been reported of sexual transmission from the semen of male survivors; there has also been one report suggesting that the virus spread through a survivor's breast milk.

Researchers aren't sure how the woman in the Lancet study infected her husband and sons. They ruled out travel to areas where there was an active Ebola outbreak and contact with animals that could spread the virus. The researchers said it was probably from close physical contact or contact with bodily fluids. (It is highly unlikely that the woman infected her husband through sex, researchers said. There is no recorded evidence of sexual transmission from female survivors.)

During the West African epidemic, family members in the same household became infected by cleaning a sick person's waste or washing linens or sharing utensils, said lead author Emily Kainne Dokubo, a medical officer and epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dokubo was deputy director of CDC's Ebola response in Liberia during the outbreak.

One of the biggest mysteries about Ebola, one of the world's deadliest pathogens, has been recurrent disease in survivors. Even after patients have fully recovered, virus particles have been detected in semen, breast milk, spinal fluid and the inside of the eye. American physician Ian Crozier's left eye turned from blue to green because of the virus that remained in his body after he was infected treating patients in Sierra Leone in September 2014. A Scottish nurse recovered but had several relapses.

A study published in the Lancet two years ago warned that Ebola lingers in semen much longer than previously thought. One man was found to still carry the virus 565 days after he recovered from the illness.

The latest study "highlights the fact that we are just starting to understand the epidemiology and clinical course of Ebola virus infection," said Anne Rimoin, an infectious disease expert at UCLA and longtime researcher on Ebola who was not involved in the study. "It also highlights the need for continued monitoring and study of Ebola virus survivors and their close contacts, long after an outbreak is declared 'over.'

We still have a lot to learn about the nature of these persistent infections and what drives them."

Dokubo said: "We don't want countries to have a sense of complacency that everything is fine and we can go back to normal business. We need to keep in place the systems that can help prevent another outbreak from happening."

Most survivors are healthy and have developed protective antibodies to reduce the chances of getting infected again, Dokubo said. Ebola reemergence is very rare, and researchers don't know what factors are associated with viral persistence, she said.

At the same time, she said, "we don't want to sound the alarm and have people thinking there are a bunch of people walking around with active virus."

The findings could "lead to additional stigma around survivors of Ebola," Lorenzo Subissi, an infectious disease expert in Brussels, noted in an accompanying commentary. Vaccination, which was deployed to fight the recent Ebola outbreak in Congo, could become an important strategy to control both spread and stigma, he wrote.

A team of three dozen researchers from the CDC, the World Health Organization and Liberia's Ministry of Health, among others, investigated the woman's family and analyzed the genetics of the virus found among them.

In July 2014, the woman cared for her sick brother, who later died of Ebola. She became very sick with symptoms consistent with Ebola infection. (Initial symptoms typically include tiredness, headache and fever. That is often followed by vomiting, diarrhea and, in some cases, bleeding.) She recovered but was never diagnosed or treated; she was later found to have antibodies to the Ebola virus, indicating that she had been infected.

In May 2015, Liberia was declared Ebola-free. A flare-up of cases occurred afterward but was quickly contained. The country was again declared Ebola-free on Sept. 3, 2015.

On Sept. 27, 2015, the woman had a baby. She fell sick about a month later. The authors speculate that her infection re-emerged then, because pregnancy can cause latent infections to turn into symptomatic disease.

While she transferred protective antibodies against Ebola to her newborn son, the authors suggest that she transmitted the virus to the other family members during her flare-up.

Genetic analysis suggests that the virus carried by the father and the two infected sons was similar and a continuation of the West African disease outbreak.

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Marine Corps Aims For 15 'Suicide Drones' Controlled By Single Front-Line Operator (Ernst, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Douglas Ernst

The U.S. Marine Corps sees swarming "suicide drones" as a key to survival on future battlefields.

A recent roundtable event with Capt. Matt Cornachio of Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory highlighted the emerging need for loitering munitions. Military officials see the drones as a literal lifesaver in situations where Marines do not have complete airspace control.

"It is not out of the realm of possible to think these things can be in the air for three up to four hours," the officer told Marine Corps Times.

Marines have successfully tested a single operator controlling six drones at once, but Capt. Cornachio and other officials envision of future where 15 aircraft can fly with "minimal operator burden."

"[It's about] having the machines do the work for you," he added.

One way the Corps plans on achieving its goal is by equipping future drones with automatic target recognition capability.

"The Corps already is amid plans to equip its RQ-21 Blackjack drone with the Intrepid Tiger II counter radar capability payload, according to the Corps' 2018 aviation plan," the newspaper reported.

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ISIS

ISIS 2.0?: Coordinated Attack Sparks Fear Islamic State May Be Rebuilding In Iraq (Muñoz, WT)

Muqtada al-Sadr, political upheaval generated by parliamentary elections exacerbates alarm

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Carlo Muñoz

A brazen, coordinated daytime attack in the heart of northern Iraq's Kurdistan region Monday is stoking concerns that the threat posed by the Islamic State has not subsided but is rebuilding its resources in the months after Washington and Baghdad declared the group's defeat last July.

The strike on government facilities in Irbil, the capital of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, was the group's highest-profile attack against the city since its blistering military campaign seized territory across Syria and northern Iraq in 2014.

One week after the top U.S. commander in the Middle East insisted that the terrorist group had been contained, three gunmen shot their way into Irbil's main regional government building.

They continued firing at employees before all three were killed or captured by security forces, according to news reports. One employee was killed and four security force members were injured during the shootout with the militants, who had taken control of the third floor of the governorate building.

"We believe that the attackers are from Islamic State because of the tactics they used in breaking into the building from the main gate," a security official told the Reuters news agency. At press time, Islamic State had not officially claimed responsibility for the attack.

Kurdish paramilitary forces in Iraq and Syria have been seen as key to the successful fight to turn back Islamic State, often taking the lead in battles alongside Iraqi and U.S. forces.

U.S. military officials characterized a burst of Islamic State operations in sparsely populated Iraqi provinces as the last desperate operations of a movement that once sought to establish a permanent Islamist "caliphate" in the heart of the Middle East.

"We've always acknowledged that the [Islamic State] networks will go to ground. They will continue to return to some of their terrorist roots. They will continue to try to exert influence and re-exert their networks" after the loss last July of the terrorist group's de facto Iraqi capital of Mosul — 50 miles west of Irbil, Gen. Joseph Votel, U.S. Central Command chief, said last week.

American and allied forces are working with their counterparts in Baghdad to address the threat posed by Islamic State remnants, Gen. Votel told reporters at the Pentagon. However, U.S. and Iraqi military leaders say they are confident that the terrorist group is not poised to reassert its dominance in Iraq or elsewhere in the region.

"I'm not ready to declare that an ISIS comeback, or a resurgence, to this particular point," Gen. Votel said.

President Trump insisted last week that the fight against Islamic State was all but over.

"I think that when you look at all of the progress that's been made in certain sections with the eradication of ISIS, about

98 percent, 99 percent there," he said during a joint press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki.

The attack in Irbil has raised questions over the U.S. assessment.

According to reports, several men armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades stormed the Kurdistan Regional Government complex in Irbil and engaged with local security forces in a five-hour gunbattle inside the building. The attackers breached the initial security perimeter and took hostages inside the building. One Kurdish government employee was killed and two Kurdish police officers were wounded, Reuters reported.

One of the gunmen was killed by security forces at the scene, and another reportedly detonated a suicide vest during the attack, Al Jazeera reported. A third attacker was wounded and taken into custody.

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for series of terrorist strikes that has Iraqis fearing its full-scale resurgence in the country.

Militants have carried out dozens of kidnappings, suicide bombings and attacks against local government leaders and security forces in the Iraqi provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk and Saladin, just northeast of Baghdad. The terrorist group has targeted electric plants and oil pipelines and has set up fake security checkpoints along the main road between Kirkuk and Baghdad, The Washington Post reported last week.

"Of course people are nervous. People finally thought there was stability and that they can travel wherever they want, and then there are these attacks and this video, and people are afraid again," Diyala Provincial Council member Imad Mahmoud told the newspaper.

"The terrorists are attacking from the empty desert and the mountains where there are still small cells. They are not large in number, but they are launching surprise, fast attacks and they have people inside the towns who are helping them," he said.

Frustration and fear about the potential rise of Islamic State's next generation in Iraq has been exacerbated by the political upheaval generated by parliamentary elections in May in which a party headed by nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr came first and led to lengthy, inconclusive coalition talks.

Southern unrest

The Islamic State's resurgence has been hastened by growing unrest in Iraq's south. Hundreds of protesters have descended on the southwestern city of Basra in the past week to demand better government services and to lambaste

rampant corruption that they say plagues the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

In an attempt to quell the unrest in Basra and the surrounding areas such as Amara, Nasiriyah and Najaf, Mr. al-Abadi ordered units from the Iraqi army's 9th Division to restore order. The Iraqi leader also cut all internet access in Baghdad to keep protest organizers from rallying more followers to their cause, according to local reports.

Mr. al-Sadr's Sairoon alliance captured over 40 percent of the parliamentary vote in the May elections, and the Iranian-backed Fatah alliance came in second. Mr. al-Abadi's Victory alliance came in third place, forcing Mr. al-Abadi's party to form a ruling coalition with Tehran and the Sadrist.

Mr. al-Sadr's victory has drawn concern from U.S. and allied commanders, since the Shiite cleric has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and warning that those troops could become targets of Shiite paramilitary groups.

Canadian forces were tapped this month to lead NATO's new military adviser mission in Iraq, as part of an effort to transform the U.S.-led coalition into a more multinational campaign.

The NATO mission can proceed only with the explicit endorsement and cooperation from Baghdad, which U.S. and allied military leaders acknowledge is uncertain.

"We are in Iraq at the invitation of the government of Iraq, and we are pursuing the things that they have asked us to provide assistance on," Gen. Votel said. "And as we move forward, I expect that we will continue to do that."

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UK Expects US Trial For Syria 'Beatles' Fighters (Ritchie, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Alice Ritchie

Britain said Monday it was sharing intelligence to help the United States bring to trial two British fighters captured in Syria, known as the "Beatles," and sparked outrage by saying it would not block the death penalty.

Security Minister Ben Wallace told MPs that a British trial was unlikely for Alexandra Amon Kotey and El Shafee el-Sheikh, who were picked up earlier this year by US-backed Syrian forces.

He also said the pair were not UK citizens, without giving further details. News reports had said that the government had unusually stripped them of their nationality.

But the failure to seek assurances from Washington that the two men would not face the death penalty drew anger from lawmakers of all parties, while Amnesty International called it "deeply worrying".

"We do not think we have the evidence here to try them in the United Kingdom... it is likely there is a trial that is carried out in the United States," Wallace told the House of Commons.

He added: "When the request came in for sharing of evidence, this government took the decision – rare as it is – to share that evidence without seeking assurances."

Kotey and Sheikh were part of a four-member kidnapping gang within the Islamic State group dubbed "The Beatles" by their captives due to their heavy British accents.

They were notorious for videotaping beheadings and are believed to have killed American journalist James Foley and many Western aid workers.

Wallace said assurances about the death penalty might "get in the way" of a future trial, but added: "We're not talking about UK citizens."

He also said that "we should not forget that the crimes that we're talking about involve the beheading and videoing of those beheading dozens of innocent people by one of the most abhorrent organisations walking this earth."

– Don't make them martyrs –

The fate of the pair was discussed in a letter by British Home Secretary Sajid Javid to US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, which was leaked to the Daily Telegraph.

The decision not to demand assurances on the death penalty sparked widespread anger and an emergency Commons debate on Monday.

One Labour MP accused the government of having "unilaterally ripped up" years of opposition to capital punishment around the world, while a former minister in the ruling Conservatives said it was a "major departure".

Amnesty spokesman Allan Hogarth said: "A failure to seek assurances on this case seriously jeopardises the UK's position as a strong advocate for the abolition of the death penalty."

Foley's mother Diane told BBC radio that her son's killers should go to jail but said putting them to death "would just make them martyrs in their twisted ideology".

Wallace insisted: "Our longstanding position on the use of the death penalty has not changed."

He added that Britain "will not share information with the United States if those individuals were going to end up in Guantanamo Bay", the US detention camp on Cuba.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) caught Kotey in January as he tried to flee Syria for Turkey, while a US defence official said in February that Sheikh had also been captured by Syrian rebel forces.

Wallace said: "The individuals that we're talking about, or foreign fighters at the moment in general, are currently held by non-state actors in Syria."

"That is a big challenge for all European states and indeed the US about how those people are brought back."

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British Official Drops Demand To Forgo Death Penalty In ISIS Case, But Government Hedges

(WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

Britain's home secretary last month sent a letter to Attorney General Jeff Sessions, stating that his government would drop a demand that two alleged Islamic State militants be spared the death penalty if convicted in a U.S. court, in an apparent bid to resolve a standoff between the countries over which one should take custody of the men.

The June 22 letter by Sajid Javid to Sessions sparked an uproar in Britain when it was described on Sunday in the Telegraph, a British newspaper. In response, Prime Minister Theresa May, through a spokeswoman, said the government's opposition to capital punishment remains unchanged.

That long-standing policy against the death penalty has been seen as one impediment to a prosecution in the United States of Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, who allegedly belonged to a four-member Islamic State cell thought to have played a key role in torturing and killing American and British hostages. The men, whose British accents gave the cell its moniker the Beatles, were captured and detained in Syria.

U.S. prosecutors have requested that the British share evidence they've acquired, including a voice analysis that could aid in the identification of Kotey. But the British government had balked at sharing evidence without some assurance that it would not be used in a prosecution that might end in a death sentence.

Though some officials within May's conservative government are not averse to capital punishment, the British public is staunchly against it. To reassure the public, Security Minister Ben Wallace on Monday told Parliament: "Our long-standing position on use of the death penalty has not changed. The U.K. has a long-standing policy of opposing the death penalty as a matter of principle, regardless of nationality."

The two militants, whose British citizenship was revoked over their alleged affiliation with the cell, are being held in Syria, where they were captured in February by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, the main ally of the United States in Syria.

"I am of the view that there are strong reasons for not requiring a death penalty assurance in this specific case, so no such assurances will be sought," Javid wrote in the letter, according to the Telegraph.

May's office told reporters that there was no contradiction between the government's opposition to the death penalty and Javid's decision not to seek an assurance against execution.

"It's an extraordinary statement about the British reluctance to prosecute these men, that they're willing to withdraw requirements that they have imposed on U.S. cooperation for so long," said Nicholas J. Lewin, a former counterterrorism prosecutor in Manhattan. "It strikes me as a finely honed effort to get the U.S. to take these guys and prosecute them."

Some relatives of the victims, including the mother of James Foley, have spoken out against seeking the death penalty, saying they would prefer that the men serve life in prison.

The Telegraph also reported that according to other documents, British officials have assessed that Kotey and Elsheikh may be sent to the U.S. military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and that such an outcome would not be formally opposed.

Wallace, the security minister, appeared to dispute that possibility, too. "The U.K. government's long-standing position is that the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay should close. Where we share evidence with the [United States], it must be for the express purpose of progressing a criminal prosecution and we have made that clear to the United States," he told parliament.

It is not clear what impact Javid's letter to Sessions has had on Trump administration deliberations over how to handle the militants. Although career prosecutors think they can win at trial, Sessions personally favors sending the men to Guantanamo. And the position of the State and Defense departments has been that Britain, as the militants' country of origin, should take them for prosecution.

The National Security Council declined to discuss the matter, issuing the following statement: "President Trump is committed to using all available tools to defeat terrorism and protect the United States homeland and its interests abroad. Decisions regarding the disposition of captured terrorists will be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account legal requirements and the facts of each case."

A Justice Department spokesman also declined to comment on the matter. "The president and his national security team will pursue the option that best protects the national security interests of the United States," spokesman Wyn Hornbuckle said.

Christopher Costa, who until earlier this year was Trump's senior director for counterterrorism and who now heads the International Spy Museum, said: "My bottom line is these individuals have to face justice, and right now the best form of justice would be the United States criminal justice system."

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NEAR EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Analysis: Trump's Iran Threat Latest Combative Global Move (Lemire, Miller, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Jonathan Lemire And Zeke Miller

As the presidential tweets ricochet from one world hot spot to another, a Trump Doctrine has emerged: Claim matchless strength, suffer no slight and counter-punch harder than you are hit — at least verbally.

President Donald Trump's searing ALL CAPS response to a relatively routine Iran provocation is the latest example of Trump's refusal to show weakness, continuing a pattern that includes showdowns with North Korea, China and even NATO allies, with Russia the notable exception. Trump's tough-guy rhetoric has become a defining characteristic of his overseas affairs, as have the relatively modest results.

His late Sunday tweet warning of "CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE" caught Trump's staff by surprise, sparked a fresh day of foreign policy confusion, and triggered fears of a potential nuclear showdown in the Middle East. The tweet was reminiscent of Trump's brash warning of "fire and fury" for North Korea last year, part of an exchange of bravado in which he and Kim Jong Un's government compared the relative size of their nuclear buttons.

White House officials now cast those exchanges with Kim as a negotiating tactic to bring the mercurial autocrat to the negotiating table, culminating in last month's Singapore summit. But despite Trump's pronouncements that he is "very happy" with the results of the summit, the North has yet to take concrete steps toward denuclearizing, nor has it returned the remains of some U.S. service members, as was promised as part of the two-page agreement signed in Singapore.

Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders wouldn't rule out that the latest tweet about Iran was a similar negotiating

gambit. "I'm not going to get into the president's strategy," she said Monday. "But I think he's very clear about what he's not going to allow to take place."

The Iran tweet, responding to the latest threat from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, came on the heels of a frustrating week for a White House reeling from denunciations of Trump's treatment of Russia's Vladimir Putin during their summit in Helsinki. The president initially refused to say whether he believed the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, instead giving equal weight to Putin's denials.

Critics were quick to seize upon his Iran threat as an attempt to change the subject. Sanders retorted: "I think the president has the ability, unlike a lot of those in the media, to actually focus on more than one issue at a time."

But the broadside to Tehran fit a pattern for Trump, a commander in chief who responds to the slightest provocation with punishment. The all-caps shot across Iran's bow appeared to be prompted by a speech by Rouhani, who told diplomats Sunday in Tehran that Americans "must understand that war with Iran is the mother of all wars and peace with Iran is the mother of all peace," state television reported.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., tweeted that Trump has a "dangerous habit" of attacking world leaders online. She said his "obsession with looking tough on Twitter is weakening our standing on the world stage and seriously jeopardizing our national security."

Beyond his monthslong rhetorical volleys with Kim, Trump has unleashed verbal attacks against friend and foe alike when he felt disrespected. After last month's Group of Seven meeting of industrialized nations in Canada, that nation's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, delivered a mild rebuke to Trump by suggesting that Canada may have to levy retaliatory tariffs against the United States.

"Canadians, we're polite, we're reasonable, but we also will not be pushed around," Trudeau said.

Seeing the news coverage while on Air Force One, Trump unleashed a furious series of tweets against arguably the United States' closest ally, calling Trudeau "very dishonest & weak" and threatening to escalate tensions further.

During this month's NATO summit in Brussels, Trump deployed similarly incendiary language, accusing Germany of being controlled by Russia and repeatedly casting doubt on the cornerstone of the NATO alliance, a commitment to mutual defense. Trump claimed his rhetoric secured concessions from NATO allies to boost their spending on defense closer to the previously agreed-upon target of 2

percent of gross domestic product by 2024, but the increases he claimed were already in the works. As the U.S. leader reveled in a celebratory media tour, allies denied they had given Trump anything of substance.

During the tariff standoff with China, Trump has repeatedly escalated his fiery language — and boasted that trade wars are “easy to win” — only to see Beijing retaliate and levy tariffs that could cripple some American workers, including farmers, who have trended toward supporting the president.

But for all of Trump’s diplomatic bluster, there is one nation with which he has tended to pull his punches: Russia.

As the special counsel probe into possible links between Russia and Trump campaign officials forges on, Trump has stepped up his attacks on the investigation while also trying to draw closer to Moscow. In one of his tweets over the weekend, he deemed Russian election interference “a big hoax,” yet again casting doubt on the findings of this nation’s intelligence agencies.

Sanders insisted Monday that the Trump “has been extremely tough on Russia, probably more so than with any other country” and wondered “why that is so hard for the media to write about.”

But while the Trump administration has moved to enact some tough sanctions on Russia, the president himself has repeatedly sought to tighten ties to Putin, whom he invited to the White House this fall even after the firestorm of controversy sparked by the Helsinki summit.

Putin’s visit drew a cool response from Republican leaders, who have no plans for the Russian to address Congress. And some would prefer he not visit the U.S. in the fall at all.

“I’m one who thinks that it’s a good thing for leaders of countries to talk, but I would consider putting that one on the back burner for a while,” said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

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Trump And Top Aides Target Iran, Suddenly Escalating Tensions (Wilkinson, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Los Angeles Times

By Tracy Wilkinson

In an abrupt escalation of tensions with Iran, President Trump is threatening the Islamic Republic with war unless it changes its ways, in concert with senior advisors who are speaking out on separate fronts.

Critics immediately branded the threats as Trump’s attempt to divert attention from widespread, bipartisan disapproval of his troubled dealings with Russia, criticism that has only grown since last week’s Helsinki summit with President Vladimir Putin and amid attention to the upcoming trial of his former campaign manager, Paul Manafort.

But in contrast to the Russia controversy, where Trump’s embrace of Putin has seemed oddly at cross-purposes with the tough policies of his own administration, on Iran, senior officials echoed the president on Sunday and Monday with their tough talk, just weeks before the administration plans to slap brutal economic sanctions on the country.

In a blistering tweet, Trump wrote shortly before midnight Sunday in Washington, “To Iranian President Rouhani,” and then hit his caps-lock button for the message:

Trump was apparently responding to a speech earlier Sunday by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in which the Iranian warned of a “mother of all wars” if the United States attacked.

“Mr. Trump, don’t play with the lion’s tail,” Rouhani warned. He also said, however, that peaceful ties between the two countries could be the “mother of all peace.”

Though Trump may have been replying to Rouhani, the tweet came as part of an overall administration escalation of verbal attacks on Iran. On Sunday evening in Simi Valley, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo gave a harsh speech denouncing what he called Tehran’s “Mafia” government and pledging support for Iranians who would challenge it.

Pompeo said Iran’s clerics and “hypocritical holy men” run a kleptocracy that enriches them while impoverishing ordinary Iranians, all while quashing domestic opponents and promoting terrorism abroad.

And on Monday, John R. Bolton, Trump’s national security advisor, echoed Trump’s angry tweet in similar words. The president “told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before,” Bolton, a longtime hawk, said in a statement.

Trump’s tweet was reminiscent of his threats, issued at just about this time last summer, to unleash “fire and fury like the world has never seen” against a nuclear-armed North Korea if it attacked U.S. territory.

Since then, however, Trump has embarked on a rapprochement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the still-unfulfilled quest to begin to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. The two leaders met at a one-day summit in Singapore in June in which Trump made a major concession to Kim — canceling the United States’ joint military exercises with South Korea — and received little, if anything, in return.

This outburst could prove more perilous, however.

Unlike with North Korea, where U.S. officials and experts agreed there was no military option against a nuclear-armed adversary, Iran hasn't built a nuclear weapon and therefore is more exposed. Several senior members of the administration — including Pompeo — at least until recently believed Iran could be contained through U.S. military action.

Also, in the case of North Korea, regional players such as South Korea and Japan were invested in finding a peaceful solution. With Iran, however, Washington's closest like-minded allies on the issue — Saudi Arabia and Israel — routinely engage in similar bellicose rhetoric, which only encourages Trump.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders would not say whether Trump consulted his national security team before the tweet. She blamed the escalation on Iran.

"If anybody's inciting anything, look no further than to Iran," she said.

The Iran tensions come after Trump withdrew the United States from an agreement to curtail Iran's nuclear activities — a landmark, international pact signed in 2015 that the administration hopes to unravel.

Tehran was abiding by the terms of the nuclear agreement, but Trump said that pact didn't go far enough. He said he wants to confront all of Tehran's "malign behavior," such as support for regional militant groups, in addition to thwarting the country's nuclear potential.

Christopher R. Hill, a veteran diplomat in Republican and Democratic administrations, said Trump's hostile rhetoric toward Iran was "raw meat" for his political base and "an effort to shift the subject" away from the Putin summit.

"Things have not gone well and this idea that he's a tough guy has really frayed," Hill said. "Sure, he's been tough on Canada and Germany, but he looked weak when he was face-to-face with Putin. This looks like an effort to tell his base, 'I really am tough.'"

Washington will unilaterally reimpose economic sanctions on Iran in a few weeks and has demanded, so far unsuccessfully, that other nations stop all imports of Iranian oil. Several European allies, who are seeking to keep the Iran agreement alive, have sought waivers from the sanctions, but the State Department has seemed unlikely to grant them.

The initial sanctions, targeting Iran's automotive sector and trade in gold and other metals, will "snap back" Aug. 6, said Brian Hook, State's director of policy planning. A second tranche of the punitive measures, targeting the energy sector and transactions with the Central Bank of Iran, go into effect Nov. 4, Hook said.

Further crippling Iran's economy potentially, the sanctions would make it extremely difficult for other countries and international companies to do business with Tehran.

Also this week, Pompeo is hosting the first ministerial level conference on religious freedom, with foreign ministers of several nations planning to attend. It gives the secretary another opportunity to highlight what he has described as Iran's repression of religious minorities.

Reaction in Congress to Trump's ratcheting up of anti-Iran rhetoric was mixed.

Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia, a Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Trump's "belligerent" tweet was "another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war" with Iran.

"The administration's hostile rhetoric and efforts to stir up internal protests against the regime are dangerous," Kaine said.

However, a senior Republican congressional aide said Trump's tirade could be part of an approach to scare Iran, and thus constrain it, that has broad party support. After Iran was largely contained in 2008, it then spread its reach to the point where its forces or proxies now are operating in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, said the official, who requested anonymity to speak candidly.

"The goal is to bottle them back up without firing a shot," the aide said. "And given Pompeo's speech last night, you can't say [Trump's] weird tweets come in the absence of a wider strategic policy."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised what he called Trump's "bold stance" against "Iranian aggression." Netanyahu was speaking ahead of a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Israel wants Russia to help remove pro-Iranian forces from Syria.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif also used Twitter, and wrote in capital letters, to respond to Trump. "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED," Zarif wrote. "The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago, he added, apparently alluding to the North Korea comments.

"We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries," Zarif said. "BE CAUTIOUS!"

On the streets of Tehran, ordinary Iranians were worried that the combative rhetoric would lead to U.S. military action or economic punishment that mostly hurts citizens. But they also continued to show their anger at what many see as the mismanagement of the country by their own leaders.

"Our rulers are incompetent and inefficient; if they had been good governors, they would have come up with efficient ways to run the country and meet the needs of their own people," said Hadi Pourasel, 55, manager of a taxi agency. "Now the threat of the U.S. administration adds to our miseries."

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Trump's Dangerous Obsession With Iran (WP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Washington Post

In America's fevered political landscape, supporters of President Trump often cast criticism of him as a symptom of a condition: "Trump derangement syndrome." Trump's opponents are so possessed by their contempt for him, the diagnosis goes, that they embrace positions and pursue policy goals they would never consider in any other context. Supposed examples of this include the newfound Russophobia among some American liberals and the knee-jerk rejection to Trump's overtures to North Korea — signs of partisan tribalism supposedly displacing political logic.

But Trump and his lieutenants are guilty of their own derangement syndromes, most conspicuously when it comes to Iran. Even as Trump has gone out of his way to cozy up to an autocrat in Moscow, embraced human-rights-abusing Arab monarchs and celebrated his friendliness with the world's most isolated dictator, he sees in Tehran an implacable, irreconcilable enemy.

On Sunday night, the White House ratcheted up tensions with the Islamic republic. Trump issued a dramatic tweet, addressing Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in all caps: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

The tweet received a bullish reply from Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, the following day.

COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them — albeit more civilized ones—for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!— Javad Zarif (@JZarif) July 23, 2018

Trump's ire was apparently sparked by comments Rouhani made on Sunday in a meeting with Iranian diplomats. "America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said, delivering a pointed warning to the Trump administration not to engage in efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime.

Rouhani seemed to be offering a rebuttal to the speech Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered later that day. During that address, Pompeo launched a lengthy attack on Iran's political leadership, arguing the theocratic regime was a corrupt "kleptocracy" and a "mafia."

"To our Iranian American and Iranian friends, tonight I tell you that the Trump administration dreams the same dreams for the people of Iran as you do," Pompeo said, "and through our labors and God's providence, that day will come true."

Pompeo's remarks were the latest broadside in a wider diplomatic offensive against Iran. Since renegeing on its end of the nuclear deal with Tehran, the White House is pushing for renewed and tougher sanctions on Iran and has cheered all glimmers of protest within the country. Trump has also consistently cast Iran as a global menace, parroting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's talking points about the country's corrosive influence in the Middle East.

There is no doubt senior Trump administration officials want regime change. Pompeo and many of his former colleagues on Capitol Hill court the support of anti-regime outfits in the Iranian diaspora that have little clout at home. National security adviser John Bolton, who has spent much of his career saber-rattling at Iran, issued a statement reiterating Trump's threats. "I spoke to the President over the last several days," it read, "and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before." A coterie of other Washington neoconservatives who once championed the ill-fated invasion of Iraq have resurfaced, urging a new confrontation.

That's why numerous Iran analysts are wary of parallels between Trump's current tweets and the "fire and fury" declarations that preceded his historic summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. "Unlike the case of North Korea, enmity with Iran is quite ideological in this administration," said Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group.

Ari Fleischer says the US should destabilize Iran to initiate regime change: "The more unstable we can help Iran to become, the better it is to actually secure peace" <https://t.co/JyRTeXfpVr pic.twitter.com/whXey0jhKc>— Media Matters (@mmfa) July 23, 2018

Meanwhile, Rouhani's position is growing weaker. Many Iranians now pin the country's slumping economy on the

president, angry that the nuclear deal has not delivered the economic benefits he promised. The hard-line forces Rouhani once maneuvered against are ascendant.

The Trump administration "has strengthened the hand of hardline Iranian factions, in the clerical and judicial establishment as well as in the Revolutionary Guards, who always said it was a mistake to strike a deal with the U.S.," reported Najmeh Bozorgmehr of the Financial Times. "These groups, who believe their position has been vindicated, have been able to use the threats from Mr Trump and others to reassert their authority, adding to pressure on Mr Rouhani, whose credibility has been badly damaged by his failure to keep the deal and new economic curbs from Washington."

That could provoke a backlash from the regime, via its proxy forces in various corners of the Middle East. "Western countries should be aware that if they put too much pressure on Iran, it could unleash radical Shia forces and trigger a new wave of Islamic radicalism," added Hossein Marashi, a reformist politician in Tehran.

That may be exactly what Washington's own hard-liners want. On Sunday, Pompeo dismissed any prospect that there are real political differences in Tehran, arguing that Rouhani and Zarif are "merely polished frontmen for the ayatollah's international con artistry. Their nuclear deal didn't make them moderates; it made them wolves in sheep's clothing." Trump's lieutenants are positioning themselves as champions of revolutionary change within Iran — or for armed conflict with an increasingly cornered adversary.

But the Trump administration's grandstanding on this front is unlikely to galvanize popular discontent within Iran. "The more the U.S. threatens Iran, and the more ordinary Iranians have to deal with economic hardships," argued Vaez, "the less motivation [Iranians] may have for pursuing any kind of radical change." Leadership in Tehran, Vaez told Today's WorldView, is skilled at survival and content to batten down the hatches and wait out the Trump administration.

My colleague Jason Rezaian, who endured a year and a half in Iranian prison, attended Pompeo's event. For all its zeal for change, he observed, the Trump administration is simply the wrong messenger.

"Most of what Pompeo said about the depravity of Iran's rulers was true," wrote Rezaian, "but when coupled with U.S. moves that directly hurt Iranians — specifically, stiff economic sanctions and the recently upheld travel ban — it is difficult for the administration to support its own claims that the well-being and prosperity of Iranians matter."

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Trump Steps Up Pressure, But Iran Says It's 'Unimpressed' (Lee, Miller, AP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Associated Press

By Matthew Lee And Zeke Miller

President Donald Trump's explosive Twitter threat to Iran's leader comes as his administration is ratcheting up a pressure campaign on the Islamic republic that many suspect is aimed at regime change.

No one is predicting imminent war. But Trump's bellicose, all-caps challenge addressed to President Hassan Rouhani followed a speech by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which he accused Iran's leadership of massive corruption and widespread rights abuses and urged Iranians to rise up in protest.

Both the tweet and the speech landed less than two weeks before the administration will begin re-imposing sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the 2015 nuclear deal. In the meantime, the U.S. is stepping up Farsi-language outreach that is intended to support Iranians demonstrating against the policies of their government.

Trump's tweet doesn't appear to have been prompted by any notable shift in rhetoric from Iran.

It could have been an impulsive reaction to reports from Tehran quoting Rouhani as giving the U.S. an oft-repeated reminder that conflict with Iran would be "the mother of all wars." Yet animosity directed at the Iranian leadership is an established part of the administration's broader foreign policy.

Iran publicly shrugged off Trump's late Sunday message — "NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Tweeted Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday: "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them — albeit more civilized ones — for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Asked at the White House if he had concerns about provoking Iran, Trump said simply, "None at all."

Tehran is already aware of what is coming from the administration as consequences of Trump's May withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord take shape.

As Pompeo noted in his speech to Iranian-Americans and others in California on Sunday, the centerpiece will be the re-

imposition of U.S. economic sanctions; the first batch will go back into force Aug. 4, targeting the Iranian automotive sector and trade in gold and other metals. A more significant set of sanctions that will hit Iran's oil industry and central bank by punishing countries and companies that do business with them will resume Nov. 4.

"Right now, the United States is undertaking a diplomatic and financial pressure campaign to cut off the funds that the regime uses to enrich itself and support death and destruction," Pompeo said in his speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley.

Pompeo also slammed Iran's political, judicial and military officials, accusing several by name of participating in rampant corruption, and called its religious leaders "hypocritical holy men" who amassed wealth while allowing their people to suffer. He said the government has "heartlessly repressed its own people's human rights, dignity and fundamental freedoms," and he hailed the "proud Iranian people (for) not staying silent about their government's many abuses."

"The United States under President Trump will not stay silent either," he said.

He was right. True to form, Trump did not stay silent. But the White House blamed Rouhani for inciting the war of words with his comment that "America must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars."

"WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!" Trump wrote.

Reaction from Congress, particularly Democrats, was swift and critical.

Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, acknowledged that Iran's terrorist activities in the Middle East pose a threat but suggested it wouldn't be solved through a tweet from Trump.

"Sadly, after pulling us out of the nuclear deal with Europe and Iran, there doesn't seem to be strategy for how to move forward to fight Iran's activities," she said.

And Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, the 2016 Democratic vice presidential candidate, called the Twitter blast from the White House "another warning sign that Trump is blundering toward war with Iran."

Trump's National Security Council pushed back with a statement saying: "Our differences are with the Iranian regime's actions and, in particular, with the actions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, not the Iranian people. The Trump administration's Iran policy seeks to address the

totality of these threats and malign activities and to bring about a change in the Iranian regime's behavior."

"If anybody's inciting anything, look no further than to Iran," said White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said. She added that Trump has been "very clear about what he's not going to allow to take place."

Trump has a history of firing off heated tweets that seem to quickly escalate long-standing disputes with leaders of nations at odds with the U.S.

In the case of North Korea, the verbal war cooled quickly and gradually led to the high-profile summit and denuclearization talks. Still, there has been little tangible progress in a global push to rid North Korea of its nuclear weapons program since the historic Trump-Kim Jong Un summit on June 12.

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White House Says Iran's Hassan Rouhani To Blame For Provoking Trump's Warlike Threats (Boyer, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dave Boyer

The White House blamed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Monday for provoking warlike threats from President Trump, as the administration sought to step up economic and political pressure on Iran in a campaign similar to the strategy that brought North Korea to the nuclear bargaining table.

Gearing up to implement tough economic sanctions on an Iranian economy that is already faltering, Mr. Trump and his top advisers also have made it clear to Iran's leaders in the past two days that the U.S. will no longer sit back quietly in the face of Tehran's typical "death to America" rhetoric and other threats.

In a tweet shortly before midnight Sunday, Mr. Trump issued an all-caps warning directly to Mr. Rouhani: "NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKE OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

It was reminiscent of Mr. Trump's "fire and fury" warning to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last summer.

Mr. Trump fired this online shot across the bow after the Iranian leader declared in Tehran, "America must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars."

Liberals accused Mr. Trump of attempting to pivot away from negative media coverage of his summit last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin by threatening war against another longtime U.S. adversary in the Middle East.

"President Trump's belligerent tweet is another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war with Iran," said Sen. Tim Kaine, Virginia Democrat and co-author of a 2015 law that gave Congress the right to review the Iranian nuclear deal before congressional sanctions could be lifted. "The prospect of President Trump starting a catastrophic war should concern us all, and we must be vigilant in stopping it."

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Mr. Trump has been tougher on Iran than President Obama since the beginning of his presidency and that his latest comments were consistent with his approach to Tehran, which included pulling out of the nuclear deal last spring.

"The president's responding to Iran, and he's not going to allow them to continue to make threats against America," Mrs. Sanders said. "If anybody is inciting anything, look no further than to Iran."

Asked by reporters Monday afternoon whether he had any concerns about provoking tensions with Iran, Mr. Trump replied, "None at all."

Mr. Rouhani scoffed at Mr. Trump's threat to halt Iranian oil exports and said Iran has a dominant position in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping waterway. Washington later eased its stance, saying it might grant sanction waivers to some allies.

In reaction to Iran's threats, the U.S. military has renewed its pledge to secure free flow of oil from the strait. However, at least as of last week, the Pentagon said those Iranian threats had not led the U.S. military to reposition or add to forces in the Middle East.

"We haven't adjusted our force posture in response to any of those statements. And I don't think that's warranted. I wouldn't recommend that," John Rood, undersecretary of defense for policy, told a security forum in Colorado on Friday.

James Jay Carafano, a national security specialist at The Heritage Foundation, said the president was expressing himself to Tehran "in a uniquely Trumpian manner."

"No one should doubt the U.S. resolve to protect its interests," Mr. Carafano said. "The president was not afraid to use force in Syria. Clearly, he would do so here, but only if provoked on the ground — he is not going to be cowed or impressed by threats from Tehran. On the other hand, he is not going to be reckless in the use of force, but I imagine if the Iranians

thought about trying something, the tweet was a reminder they won't get away with it."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is bitterly opposed to Iran, praised Mr. Trump's "strong stance." Germany said threats of war were "never helpful."

With popular discontent over Iran's faltering economy and sliding currency, and the prospect of tough new U.S. sanctions, Iran's leaders have called for unity.

The Iranian rial plunged to a record low against the U.S. dollar on the unofficial market on Monday amid fears of military confrontation between Iran and the United States. The dollar was being offered for as much as 92,000 rials, compared with about 75,000 last week.

While Washington prepares to reimpose economic sanctions on Tehran after pulling out of the nuclear deal, Iran's faction-ridden religious and political elites have closed ranks against Mr. Trump's hawkish approach.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the administration will never stop calling out Iran for its human rights abuses, religious persecution and fomenting of terrorism.

"Sometimes it seems the world has become desensitized to the regime's authoritarianism at home and its campaigns of violence abroad, but the proud Iranian people are not staying silent about their government's many abuses," Mr. Pompeo said in a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California. "And the United States under President Trump will not stay silent either. In light of these protests and 40 years of regime tyranny, I have a message for the people of Iran: The United States hears you; the United States supports you; the United States is with you."

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Iran Accuses Trump Of Engaging In 'Psychological Warfare' With Bellicose Tweets (Boyer, WT)

Bolton confirms Trump won't tolerate any "negative" moves by Iran

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Dave Boyer

White House National Security Adviser John R. Bolton said Monday that President Trump won't tolerate any "negative" actions by Iran, as the administration steps up its "maximum pressure" campaign on Tehran.

"I spoke to the President over the last several days, and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever

paid before," Mr. Bolton said in a statement issued by the White House.

His comment came after Mr. Trump tweeted a warning shortly before midnight Sunday to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani:

"NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!"

A high-ranking Iranian official responded Monday to Mr. Trump's warning of possible military action, saying the president "won't dare" launch an attack on Tehran.

Gen. Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar, chief of a paramilitary arm of the Revolutionary Guard, said Mr. Trump's threat of historic "consequences" for Iran are nothing more than "psychological warfare."

In comments reported by Iran's state-run ISNA news agency, Gen. Gheibparvar said Mr. Trump "won't dare" attack Iran.

Some Democrats in Congress reacted with alarm to Mr. Trump's comments.

"President Trump's belligerent tweet is another alarming warning sign that he's blundering toward war with Iran," said Sen. Tim Kaine, Virginia Democrat and a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Just months after the president backed out of the deal that prevented Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the administration's hostile rhetoric and efforts to stir up internal protests against the regime are dangerous. The U.S. should continue to target Iran with tough sanctions, but we should not get pulled into another preventable war in the Middle East."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. is committed to "undertaking a diplomatic and financial pressure campaign to cut off the funds that the regime uses to enrich itself and support death and destruction."

"We have an obligation to put maximum pressure on the regime's ability to generate and move money, and we will do so," Mr. Pompeo said Sunday night in a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California. "At the center of this campaign is the re-imposition of sanctions on Iran's banking and energy sectors."

Iranian lawmaker Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh told the Associated Press that believes a military confrontation between Iran and the U.S. is highly unlikely. He said Mr. Trump and Mr. Rouhani merely "express themselves through speeches since diplomatic channels are closed." The two countries ended diplomatic relations in 1979.

The state-owned news agency belittled Mr. Trump's warning tweet to Mr. Rouhani, describing it as a "passive reaction."

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Iran Foreign Minister Tweets Back At Trump: 'BE CAUTIOUS!' (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[AFP](#)

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hit back on Monday at threats from US President Donald Trump on Twitter, warning him to "BE CAUTIOUS!"

Mimicking Trump's bellicose Twitter threat directed at Iran's leaders the previous day, Zarif wrote: "UNIMPRESSED ... We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!

Zarif was responding to Trump's tweet on Sunday, in which he warned: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

That was assumed to be a response to a speech by President Hassan Rouhani earlier in the day warning Washington not to "play with the lion's tail" and that conflict with Iran would be the "mother of all wars".

"The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago," Zarif said of Trump's tweet.

"And Iranians have heard them – albeit more civilised ones – for 40 yrs."

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After Trump Slams Iran's President, Iranian Officials Accuse Him Of 'Psychological Warfare' (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Washington Post](#)

Iranian officials accused the White House of waging "psychological warfare" and vowed Monday to resist any U.S. efforts to destabilize their government, after stark warnings by President Trump's against perceived Iranian threats.

The rapid backlash from Tehran marked some of the harshest exchanges between Iran's leadership and Washington since the Trump administration exited the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May and moved to reimpose sanctions on Iran.

It also showed the widening gulf between the United States and other world powers that were part of the nuclear accord,

which eased international economic pressures on Iran in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

European nations and others are now struggling to keep the nuclear accord alive and maintain economic ties with Iran.

The late-night missive from Trump was in response to earlier remarks from Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, in which he said that war with Iran would be "the mother of all wars." He also said the United States "must realize that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace," Iran's Tasnim News Agency reported.

Trump fired back in all capitals, saying that Iran would "SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

"WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!" he wrote.

The saber-rattling caused Iran's currency, the rial, to plunge to a record low against the dollar Monday, observers said.

The Trump administration has announced new efforts to try to undermine Iran's government, including social media messaging and a round-the-clock Persian-language broadcast channel.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the new initiative Sunday night during a speech to a crowd of Iranian Americans in California. In the past, U.S.-funded media efforts in Iran have had little impact and reached only a small audience.

The United States is also set to reimpose harsh sanctions after withdrawing from the nuclear deal with Iran and world powers earlier this year. That agreement, which was negotiated by the Obama administration, curbed elements of Iran's atomic energy program that raised proliferation concerns in exchange for an end to restrictions on Iran's oil exports and banking system.

But Trump has slammed the accord, calling it "the worst deal ever."

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qassemi, said Monday that Pompeo's speech, in which he likened Iran's rulers to the Mafia, "was hypocritical and absurd."

"These remarks are a clear example of [U.S.] interference in Iran's internal affairs," Tasnim quoted Qassemi as saying.

But the harshest words came from Iran's hard-liners, including Revolutionary Guard commanders.

"We will never abandon our revolutionary beliefs. We will resist pressure from enemies," the head of Iran's paramilitary

Basij force, Brig. Gen. Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar, said Monday, the Reuters news agency reported. The comments were carried by the Iranian Students' News Agency.

"Trump cannot do a damn thing against Iran," he said. He dismissed Trump's salvos as "psychological warfare."

Another warning came from Mohsen Rezaei, chairman of Iran's Expediency Council, an advisory body to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

He said Trump is the one who should be cautious, warning that thousands of U.S. troops in the region are "under Iran's blade" — an apparent reference to Iranian proxy forces in places such as Iraq and Syria. The pro-Iranian groups also include Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has waged battles with Israel in the past.

Military experts have long warned that Iran could use such militias to attack U.S. troops in places such as Iraq and Syria. Skirmishes this year between Israel and the Revolutionary Guard and its proxies have already raised the specter of war.

Another military commander, Kiomars Heidari, reiterated late Sunday Iran's threat to block the Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway for about 30 percent of the world's oil tanker traffic, according to the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

The strait "should either be safe for everybody or unsafe for everybody," Tasnim quoted Heidari as saying.

Some Iranians blamed the threat from Iran for causing the rial's collapse Monday, while others attributed the fall to Trump's tweet.

"The economy is a very complicated thing. Even Trump's caps lock can decrease the value of the rial," said an Iranian Twitter user using the handle @potanciel.

Twitter is blocked in Iran, and Iranians often use software to circumvent the ban. Many refrain from using their full names to avoid detection.

"Mr. Trump, don't talk with the most nervous people in the world with caps lock on," Tehran-based Hamid said on Twitter.

Others quipped that the fight between Rouhani and Trump was unfair because there are no capital letters in Persian.

Iran's government is now "looking for someone to write Rouhani's reaction in calligraphy," said U.S.-based author Siamak Mosulmani, referring to the ancient and artistic form of writing.

Speaking on "Fox & Friends" on Monday, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Iran is "inciting" tensions.

"The president has been very, very clear, again, since day one what his objectives are, and he's certainly not going to tolerate the leader of Iran making threats against Americans, making threats against this country, making threats against Israel," she said.

"This is a president who is going to stand up and make sure he is doing what is necessary. He's showing peace through strength. If needed, and steps are required, this president is not afraid to take them."

In Germany — one of the six nations that signed the nuclear deal with Iran — Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger called for "dialogue" rather than belligerence on all sides.

"We call on all sides to exercise restraint and rhetorical disarmament," he told reporters.

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Trump To Iranian President: 'Never Ever Threaten' U.S. Again, Or 'Suffer Consequences' (Hjelmgaard, Jackson, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Kim Hjelmgaard And David Jackson

Since taking office, President Donald Trump has developed a reputation for firing off heated tweets that seem to escalate disputes with world leaders at odds with the U.S.

On Monday, Trump trained his social media ire on Iran, prompting observers to wonder whether the president is seeking a confrontation with Iran or trying to change the subject politically.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders described Trump's near-midnight tweet Sunday as a response to an Iranian threat and said, "If anybody's inciting anything, look no further than to Iran."

Asked by a reporter Monday afternoon if he had any worries about provoking tensions with Iran, Trump said "none at all" as he toured the Made in America exhibition on the White House South Lawn.

Ayatollah Amoli Larijani, Iran's chief judiciary official, said the U.S. needed to know that if it attacked Iran, it would "receive a response that would be written in history," according to comments carried by IRNA, a state-run news agency.

Larijani said Trump's remarks were not unexpected from a "foolish person like Trump."

John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser, said he has spoken with Trump for "several days" about Iran, and the president "told me that if Iran does anything at all to the

negative, they will pay a price that few countries have ever paid before."

Foreign policy analysts wondered whether Trump was looking to move past a spate of political troubles, including fallout from last week's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, or is serious about confronting Iraq.

As Washington prepared to reimpose economic sanctions on Iran after its withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord, Trump ratcheted up tensions late Sunday night with a stark tweet written in all capital letters.

"NEVER EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKE OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE," Trump wrote.

Trump was responding to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who said earlier in the day that "American(s) must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars." Rouhani cautioned Trump to stop "playing with the lion's tail or else you will regret it."

Trump pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in May despite objections from China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom. The deal was intended to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon.

Trump ordered increased American sanctions after those sanctions had been suspended as part of the accord. The first part of the sanctions – affecting Iran's access to U.S. dollars, its trade in gold and other commodities and its car industry – will snap back on Aug. 4. Sanctions on Iran's oil industry will be reimposed in November.

Rouhani, a moderate in Iran's theocracy that is ruled by Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has lashed out against Trump for threatening to reimpose the sanctions, for moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, and for banning travel to the U.S. from certain Muslim-majority countries.

Trump has suggested that because of Iran's poor economy and what he has characterized as its increasing isolation, Iranian leaders are "going to call me and say 'Let's make a deal.'"

Iran has rejected talks.

Some analysts said Trump may be seeking a replay of his approach to North Korea. After months of attacking its leader, Kim Jong Un, and pledging to rain "fire and fury" on the North Korean leader if he kept up his nuclear threats, Trump suddenly agreed in the spring to a meeting with Kim last month.

Yet North Korea has not yet taken affirmative steps toward ending its nuclear weapons programs, analysts said, and an aggressive approach to Iran may not lead to much in the absence of the nuclear agreement.

Colin Kahl, national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden during the Obama administration, said Trump has “appeased” Russia and “gone soft” on North Korea while abandoning the Iran nuclear deal without a backup plan.

“Now the Administration is pushing regime change & the 2 sides are exchanging threats like this,” Kahl tweeted. “Very dangerous.”

Others noted that Trump’s threat to Iran came in a single tweet amid a series of posts defending his meeting with Putin and calling for an end to the special counsel investigation into Russian efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election on Trump’s behalf.

“He’s venting,” said Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator for presidents of both parties. “He wants to appear tough, and he wants to change the channel.”

Ned Price, a special assistant for national security during the Obama administration, said, “as with all things Trump, it’s impossible to know whether this is the result of strategy or impulsiveness.”

At least one thing is clear, he said: “What’s also undeniable is that the threat of conflict with Iran is much more real than it ever was with North Korea.”

Since taking office, Trump has developed a reputation for firing off heated tweets that seem to escalate disputes with leaders of nations at odds with the U.S. In the case of North Korea, the public war of words cooled quickly and led to the high-profile summit with Kim last month in Singapore.

“WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!,” Trump wrote in his latest verbal barrage against Iran.

On Sunday night, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo separately addressed a group of Iranian-Americans in California. Pompeo denounced Rouhani and Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Iran’s chief nuclear deal negotiator. He described them as “merely polished front men for (Khamenei’s) international con artistry.” He said the Iranian leadership resembles “the Mafia more than a government” and vowed to prevent Iran from exporting its oil to other countries.

“For 40 years the Iranian people have heard from their own government that America is the Great Satan. We do not believe they are interested in hearing that #FakeNews any longer,” Pompeo tweeted Monday.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qasemi, on Monday ridiculed Pompeo’s remarks, according to IRNA, the state-run news agency.

“Pompeo’s words constituted very clear evidence showing the US efforts to meddle in Iran’s internal affairs,” he said. “The hypocritical and absurd address made by the US secretary of state was just a propaganda move.”

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Trump’s All-Caps Threat Against Iran: Loud But Hardly Clear (Landler, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Mark Landler

President Trump’s vituperative tweet against Iran late on Sunday showed his determination to use the same approach that he took to engineer a diplomatic breakthrough with North Korea. But Mr. Trump’s top advisers are far more united in their hostility to engaging with Iran, and Iran is far less likely to bend to such pressure.

Mr. Trump’s threat that Iran would “suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before,” delivered before midnight in all capital letters, succeeded in changing the subject after a week of bad headlines about his meeting with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

But it only deepened questions about the long-term direction of Mr. Trump’s Iran policy. While the White House on Monday did not rule out direct talks between the president and Iran’s leaders over its nuclear program, Mr. Trump’s hawkish national security team has put the focus more on toppling the Iranian government than striking a new deal with it.

A few hours before Mr. Trump’s tweet, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo vowed in a speech that the United States would work with the Iranian people to undermine their clerical leaders, whom he described as “hypocritical holy men,” guilty of looting their country to enrich themselves and finance Islamist terrorism around the world.

The White House scrambled to lend a veneer of coordination to Mr. Trump’s outburst. Officials said it had come after consultations with the national security adviser, John R. Bolton, and in response to statements by Iran’s president, Hassan Rouhani. A senior administration official said it augured a “more aggressive, comprehensive approach” to Iran.

Other people who know Mr. Trump said his decision to respond in such fiery terms was driven almost entirely by his search for a distraction from questions about Russia. Mr. Rouhani’s words were hardly unusual, they noted: He warned

the United States against the “mother of all wars” with Iran, but also opened the door to the “mother of all peace.”

There was nothing in Mr. Trump’s tweet to suggest he is looking to talk anytime soon. But his words carried a distinct echo of his threat last summer to North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un, whom he said faced “fire, fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.”

Eight months later, Mr. Trump accepted Mr. Kim’s invitation to meet, and after spending a few hours with him in Singapore, Mr. Trump declared that he and Mr. Kim had ended the nuclear crisis with North Korea. He has stuck to that assessment despite the fact that North Korea pledged to do nothing beyond what it has long promised, and that subsequent negotiations have bogged down in mutual recrimination.

When Mr. Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in May, he told aides and foreign leaders that his policy of maximum pressure had forced Mr. Kim to the bargaining table, and that a similar policy of overwhelming pressure would enable the United States to extract a better deal from Iran.

He has even taken credit for what he says are changes in Iran’s behavior in the region since he pulled out of the deal — an assertion that baffles Iran experts, who say there is no evidence of changes in how Iranian is operating.

Experts and former officials who have negotiated with Iran listed at least three reasons Mr. Trump would find it difficult to replicate his North Korea breakthrough with Iran.

First, Iran’s leadership is more complex and multifaceted than the one-man state of North Korea, making it harder for Tehran to reverse course like Mr. Kim did, and reach out to Mr. Trump.

Second, there are well-financed, powerful constituencies at home and abroad — like the Israeli government and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a Washington-based lobbying group — which will mobilize against any new diplomatic overture to Iran.

Third, Mr. Trump’s unilateral decision to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal gives the Iranians little incentive to negotiate with the United States, especially since the other five signers — Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China — are still adhering to it.

“The bet they’re making is that all those countries will knuckle under, and that Iran will come crawling back to the table,” said Jake Sullivan, who took part in secret talks with Iran in 2012 as an aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that led to President Barack Obama’s deal.

But Mr. Sullivan said the Trump administration had set an impossible standard for any successor agreement: that it settle all of Iran’s other issues in the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen.

“Their entire strategy is the pressure itself, with the hope that it brings down the government,” Mr. Sullivan said.

For more than a decade, Mr. Bolton advocated “the overthrow of the mullahs’ regime in Tehran.” But he recently told Voice of America that leadership change was “not the objective of the administration.” Mr. Pompeo likewise stopped short of calling for regime change, though he did not mention diplomacy in his speech Sunday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif.

By contrast, Mr. Pompeo is heavily invested in diplomacy with North Korea, where, as C.I.A. director, he helped lay the groundwork for the Singapore summit meeting and, as secretary of state, has led the negotiations with Mr. Kim’s subordinates. Mr. Bolton took a lower profile on North Korea, in part because he nearly sabotaged the meeting by declaring that the United States should use Libya as a model for ridding North Korea of its nuclear arsenal.

On Iran, however, Mr. Bolton has helped set the tone. On Monday morning, he issued a statement that was every bit as bellicose as Mr. Trump’s, except for being in lowercase letters.

“I spoke to the president over the last several days,” he said, “and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before.”

Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said: “The endgame for Trump is different than it is for hawks like Bolton and Pompeo. Trump is much more interested in what comes out of it for him personally, in terms of a Nobel Peace Prize.”

Even if Mr. Trump overcame the objections of his staff to pursue a diplomatic opening, experts said it was unlikely Iran would be receptive. His decision to pull out of the nuclear deal has strengthened the hand of hard-liners there. Leaders like Mr. Rouhani, who was once viewed as a moderate, have become more hawkish.

“The Iranians have a more complex political environment than North Korea,” said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran expert and deputy director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution. “It’s relatively easy for Kim Jong-un to turn on a dime and take advantage of an opportunity; it’s much harder for them to turn on a dime.”

Iran, Ms. Maloney noted, reacted relatively calmly to Mr. Trump’s tweet. The country’s leaders, she said, believe that

the president is trying to bait them to breach the nuclear deal, which they do not want to do. But his threats are rattling the Iranians, who worry that Mr. Trump's aides might goad him into a confrontation.

"This is moving quickly," she said, "and the president has an establishment around him that seems eager for some kind of dust-up with Iran."

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Netanyahu Praises Trump's 'Tough Stand' Against Iran (Smith, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Mike Smith

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday praised President Donald Trump's "tough stand" against Iran after the US leader issued a stark warning to the Islamic republic.

Netanyahu's remarks came hours before a meeting with top Russian officials on Iran and the situation in Syria, where Moscow-backed regime forces have been battering rebels in the south for more than a month.

"I would like to praise the tough stand expressed yesterday by President Trump and Secretary of State (Mike) Pompeo against the aggression of the Iranian regime," Netanyahu said at the start of a cabinet meeting.

"Over the years, this regime has been spoiled by the major powers and it is good to see that the US is changing this unacceptable equation."

Iran is Israel's main enemy and Netanyahu has long pushed for a tougher stand against it by international powers. He has repeatedly lauded Trump's hawkish rhetoric towards Tehran.

Trump used Twitter on Sunday to send out an all-caps salvo: "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had warned Trump on Sunday not to "play with the lion's tail," saying that conflict with Iran would be the "mother of all wars".

Trump's comments came after Pompeo, in a major address to the Iranian diaspora in California, said Washington was not afraid to sanction top-ranking leaders of the "nightmare" Iranian regime.

Netanyahu lobbied hard to have the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers cancelled, and Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in May.

All other parties to the deal – Russia, Britain, France, Germany and China – have sought to keep it in effect, saying it is working as intended by preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons for now.

Netanyahu has also pledged to keep Iran from entrenching itself militarily in neighbouring Syria, where Tehran is supporting President Bashar al-Assad in his country's civil war.

A series of strikes that have killed Iranians in Syria have been attributed to Israel.

– Russian visit –

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Moscow's military chief arrived in Israel later Monday for talks on Iran and the Syrian conflict.

Like Tehran, Moscow supports Assad in the war, but Netanyahu has held a series of talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in recent months on Syria and Iran.

Netanyahu said Putin recently requested the meeting with Lavrov and General Valery Gerasimov.

"I appreciated the words that were spoken by President Putin together with President Trump regarding the security of Israel during the recent summit," Netanyahu said after the meeting, in remarks relayed by his office.

The Russian foreign ministry said the meeting also addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and "the goal of ending the anti-terrorist operation in southern Syria, and ensuring security along the Israeli border".

On June 19, Syrian government forces launched a Russia-backed offensive to retake Daraa and Quneitra provinces in the country's south, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Regime forces have now regained control of most of the two provinces through a combination of deadly bombardment and Moscow-brokered surrender deals.

Israel is eager to obtain guarantees that Iranian forces and allied groups, such as Hezbollah, will be kept away from the Golan.

Separately on Sunday, Israel evacuated hundreds of White Helmets rescuers and their family members threatened by advancing Syrian regime forces to Jordan for resettlement in Western countries.

Jordan's foreign ministry announced in a statement that the kingdom received 422 Syrian citizens, after earlier saying it had given permission for 800 to arrive.

Founded in 2013, the Syria Civil Defence, or White Helmets, is a network of first responders which rescues the wounded in

the aftermath of air strikes, shelling or explosions in rebel-held territory.

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Rep. Jim Himes: Trump Threatening Iran For Political Points (Muñoz, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Gabriella Muñoz

Democrat Rep. Jim Himes suggested Monday that President Trump was going after Iran in order to rack up political points, after the president directed a fiery tweet at Iranian leader Hassan Rouhani.

During an interview on CNN's "New Day," the Connecticut congressman said Mr. Trump accused former President Barack Obama several times of wanting to use a war with Iran to rack up political points.

In November 2011, Mr. Trump did argue that Mr. Obama would start a war in order to get re-elected.

In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran. — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 29, 2011

"I think it's an overstatement to say we're at the brink of war," Mr. Himes said.

However, the Democrat argued that Mr. Trump's comments were geared to rally political support.

"We need to be very sensitive to the fact that this president, who doesn't have a very sophisticated sense of international relations, regards war was a way to solve political problems," he said.

Mr. Himes said the U.S. should avoid getting into a war with Iran like it did with Iraq. He argued it has been a "long time" since Americans were "really revulsed" by the effects of the Iraq war.

"So most people have forgotten what it's like to open the newspaper every day and see four or five or six American names, who were killed in a Middle Eastern war," he said, "and if Iraq was tough, wait until you try Iran."

"I think it's an overstatement to say we're at the brink of war," says Rep. @JAHimes in response to President Trump tweeting an explosive threat to Iran. "I think that's probably not true." <https://t.co/wUA3om4Wlpic.twitter.com/JdiJ5uwJax> — New Day (@NewDay) July 23, 2018

The president threatened Iran with "consequences, the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before."

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER

CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS! — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

The tweet came in response to Mr. Rouhani warning Mr. Trump that hostility toward his country would incite "the mother of all wars," according to a Reuters report.

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Hoyer Says Trump's Iran Tweet Was 'Unbecoming Of An American President' (DeBonis, WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

By Mike DeBonis

House Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer said Monday that President Trump's bellicose tweet about Iran was "unbecoming of an American president" and called it an attempt to distract from his "essentially un-American" performance at last week's summit in Helsinki with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The blistering assessment by Hoyer (D-Md.) came in response to Trump's late-night warning Sunday to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani — in all capital letters — that Iran will face severe consequences if it threatens the United States again.

"He's weak on Putin, and he wants to prove he's tough on Rouhani," Hoyer said in an interview with The Washington Post. "It's a distraction. It's a distraction from the problems that he's having both with the awful, essentially un-American performance that he had in Helsinki, and I think this is just a way to sort of turn and beat his chest and say, 'I can be really tough on people,' and Rouhani and Iran are an easy target."

"As usual, the hyperbole he used was, in my opinion, unbecoming of an American president because the message it sends is not only of danger to Iran but danger to the global community," Hoyer added. "One of the better Republican presidents said speak softly and carry a big stick. Trump does the opposite."

Hoyer was referring to President Theodore Roosevelt.

Following a joint news conference last week with Putin in Helsinki, Trump was condemned by members of both parties for not confronting the Russian leader more aggressively about interference in the U.S. election in 2016.

In his tweet Sunday night about Iran, Trump warned Rouhani to "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES

AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE.”

Earlier Sunday, Rouhani said the United States should avoid inciting Iranians against the government, with the Trump administration poised to reimpose sanctions suspended under a 2015 nuclear deal that Trump withdrew from in May.

“America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars,” Rouhani said at a meeting of Iranian diplomats, according to Iran’s state-owned Islamic Republic News Agency.

Other Democrats also stepped forward Monday to criticize Trump’s tweet.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) told reporters in New Hampshire that such tweets “aggravate the situation.”

“We have a definite challenge with Iran,” Shaheen said. “I don’t think the president’s approach, creating foreign policy through tweet, is the right one. We need to have a strategy on Iran and how we approach them.”

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), meanwhile, said that Trump’s rhetoric toward Iran was reminiscent of some of the language he previously used regarding North Korea.

“Reckless Iran rhetoric creates risks — especially if words are unbacked by actionable strategy,” Blumenthal said on Twitter. “Remember N Korea, now continuing to build nuclear capability, despite ‘fire & fury’ & a failed summit. What is Trump’s Iran strategy?”

Also on Twitter, an account maintained by Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee issued an all-caps tweet of its own, seeking to turn attention to Russian interference in the 2016 election.

“DON’T BE DISTRACTED BY ALL CAPS,” said the tweet from the committee Democrats, led by Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.). “WE’RE NOT ATTACKING IRAN. BUT RUSSIA *DID* ATTACK OUR 2016 ELECTIONS TO HELP DONALD TRUMP, AND IS DOING SO AGAIN. TRUMP REFUSES TO HOLD RUSSIA ACCOUNTABLE AND SIDES WITH PUTIN OVER OUR INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY.”

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Trump’s War Of Words With Iran Shines Spotlight On Vital Oil Route (Dipaola, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Anthony Dipaola

The war of words between U.S. President Donald Trump and his counterpart in Iran over oil exports and sanctions is

shining a spotlight on the narrow, twisting conduit for about 30 percent of the world’s seaborne-traded crude.

The Middle East’s biggest oil exporters rely on the Strait of Hormuz, the passage linking the Persian Gulf with global waterways, for the vast majority of their crude shipments — some 17.5 million barrels a day.

Should a regional conflict block that bottleneck, three of the largest Gulf Arab crude producers have pipeline networks that would potentially enable them to export as much as 4.1 million barrels via alternative outlets, according to Bloomberg calculations. Even so, this amount of oil, if sent by pipeline, would be less than a quarter of the total that typically sails on tankers through Hormuz.

Iran has renewed threats to block the Strait since the U.S. announced its plan to reimpose sanctions and cut shipments from OPEC’s third-largest producer to zero from about 2.5 million barrels a day now. The U.S. president warned Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to “never, ever threaten the United States.” Trump’s tweet came hours after Rouhani warned the U.S. against endangering Iranian oil exports and called for improved relations with neighbors, including rival Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two of America’s closest friends in the Middle East and geopolitical adversaries of Iran, both have pipeline networks that bypass Hormuz. Iraq has one operational pipeline to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean Sea. All four countries are members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and depend on the Strait to export their oil.

The total capacity of pipelines that could be used instead of Hormuz is about 7.1 million barrels a day, though some of that capacity is currently taken up by oil sent to export markets or domestic refineries. Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, the capital of the U.A.E., are each using less than half of the respective pipeline capacities, while a link from northern Iraq is about two-thirds utilized, Bloomberg data show.

“Actual export capacity that avoids the Strait is limited,” said Jaap Meijer, managing director and head of equity research at investment bank Arqaam Capital Ltd. in Dubai. Any attempt to close shipping lanes out of the Gulf and into Hormuz would likely cause oil prices to spike, he said.

Global benchmark Brent crude gained 0.9 percent to \$73.71 a barrel at 5:55 p.m. in Dubai.

State oil giant Saudi Arabian Oil Co., known as Aramco, can pump as much as 5 million barrels a day to the kingdom’s Red Sea coast via the 1,200 kilometer (746-mile) East-West pipeline, built in the 1980s to transport crude from eastern fields located close to the Persian Gulf.

Aramco Exports

Aramco has exported an average of 650,000 barrels a day from the Red Sea port of Yanbu this year, according to ship-tracking data. The company also operates four refineries that can process as much as 1.4 million barrels a day. Supplies to the refineries and shipments to Yanbu indicate that Aramco is using at least 2.05 million barrels a day of capacity along the East-West pipeline.

Abu Dhabi, with about 6 percent of the world's crude, exports some of its oil through a 1.5 million barrel-a-day pipeline to the Indian Ocean port of Fujairah. The link spans some 400 kilometers from Abu Dhabi's desert oil fields and across the Hajar mountains to Fujairah, which lies outside the Strait of Hormuz. State-run Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. has exported 626,000 barrels of crude a day on average through the pipeline so far this year, according to ship-tracking data compiled by Bloomberg.

Iraq, OPEC's second-biggest producer after Saudi Arabia, pumps about 90 percent of its oil from fields in the country's south and ships it by tankers through the Gulf. The country can also supply mainly European buyers via a pipeline from northern fields to port of Ceyhan, Turkey.

It can pump about 600,000 barrels a day through this pipeline, which passes through and is controlled by Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The link currently exports at only about two-thirds of its capacity due to a dispute over oil revenue between Kurds and the federal government in Baghdad. Iraq is working to repair a separate pipeline from its northern fields that was put out of operation during fighting against Islamic State militants.

Iran, meanwhile, is seeking to ship its own oil from a port outside the Hormuz chokepoint. It aims to start crude exports from a planned terminal on the island of Jask, in the Gulf of Oman, in 2020.

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Trump's Strategy To Pressure Iran Relies On North Korea Playbook (Wadhams, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Nick Wadhams

Trump's late-night tweet warning of dire consequences if Iran threatens the U.S. highlighted the administration's confidence in a strategy the president credits with bringing North Korea to the negotiating table – a move he boasted is already paying dividends.

In an all-caps tweet on Sunday directed at President Hassan Rouhani, Trump said the U.S. won't tolerate Iran's "DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH" – a

response to a warning that Iran's leader made to Trump. The tweet came hours after Secretary of State Michael Pompeo delivered a speech labeling Iranian leaders "hypocritical holy men" and calling out many by name for alleged corruption.

The stepped-up pressure comes about three months before U.S. sanctions snap back against countries that continue importing Iranian oil. U.S. officials reject suggestions that even close U.S. allies will end up getting broad exemptions to sanctions, saying governments must show they are significantly cutting crude imports to avoid penalties. In that way, Trump's tweet to Rouhani was also directed at reluctant U.S. allies in Europe and Asia.

Behind that effort, according to administration officials and analysts, is Trump's desire to goad Iran, which has seen repeated public protests over corruption and slow economic growth, back to the negotiating table to hammer out a new, more comprehensive deal to replace the nuclear accord the U.S. withdrew from in May.

Trump War of Words With Iran Shines Spotlight on Vital Oil Route

"The idea is to build up leverage and then explore opportunities to use that leverage," said Mark Dubowitz, the chief executive of the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies who has advised Pompeo. "The more the regime is being destabilized, the more leverage they have and the better the likelihood of a comprehensive deal on U.S. terms."

It may be working: Earlier this month, the other participants in the nuclear deal met in Vienna to look for ways to ensure Iran still gets the benefits it's seeking from the accord despite the U.S. threats. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called for "practical solutions" rather than "obscure promises." But world powers weren't able to offer concrete proposals, and diplomats have warned there may be little they can do.

'Fire and Fury'

It's no coincidence the administration is relying on the aggressive language that echoes Trump's approach to North Korea. Last year, Trump escalated his rhetoric, threatening "fire and fury" against the regime of Kim Jong Un and provoking fears of a military conflict that eased when the two leaders agreed to a historic summit. Trump has since claimed victory for defusing tensions.

"He's used this kind of tactic before with North Korea, he sees it as having succeeded and advantaged him," said Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution.

Trump and his top advisers, including Pompeo and son-in-law Jared Kushner, believe that the tough rhetoric against

North Korea, coupled with the harsher sanctions regime, played a key role in what they say is Kim's willingness to give up his nuclear weapons. And despite few details, no timetable for denuclearizing North Korea and few signs of progress since the Trump-Kim meeting, the president has publicly maintained that his approach has paid off.

Administration Doubts

"A Rocket has not been launched by North Korea in 9 months," Trump tweeted on Monday morning. "Likewise, no Nuclear Tests. Japan is happy, all of Asia is happy."

But unlike isolated North Korea, whose nuclear program unified international opinion and led to tough United Nations Security Council sanctions backed by China and Russia, many countries do business with Iran and Trump's decision to quit the nuclear deal is still broadly criticized.

Another challenge Trump faces with Iran is that his own advisers seem dubious about the possibility of reaching a deal. In his own comments, Pompeo appealed directly to Iran's people and repeatedly called on Iran to stop its support for terrorism and become a "normal" country. He said Iran must make changes "that I don't see happening today, but I live in hope."

The proximate reason for Trump's tweet were remarks by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. America "must understand well that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," Rouhani said in a speech in Tehran on Sunday. As Iran has done in the past, Rouhani warned that Iran may be willing to disrupt oil passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

The Middle East's biggest oil exporters rely on the Strait of Hormuz, the passage linking the Persian Gulf with global waterways, for the vast majority of their crude shipments — some 17.5 million barrels a day. If the passageway were closed, pipeline networks could export less than a quarter of the total, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Rouhani's Anger

"He's angry" in the wake of the U.S. decision to quit the nuclear deal he championed, Fouad Izadi, a professor of American studies at the University of Tehran, said of Rouhani. "He's put a lot of his own prestige on the line and it's not his fault that it's not working and that Trump decided to leave the nuclear agreement. So he was sending a signal that he's not the same Rouhani that he was a couple of years ago."

Trump responded with anger of his own.

In his Twitter post late Sunday, Trump said, "To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER

CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, tweeted back at Trump on Monday, scoffing in kind: "COLOR US UNIMPRESSED: The world heard even harsher bluster a few months ago. And Iranians have heard them — albeit more civilized ones — for 40 yrs. We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

Just a few hours before Trump's Sunday evening tweet, Pompeo personalized the administration's focus on Iran, calling out by name the head of Iran's judiciary, the minister of the interior and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself, stopping just short of a plea for regime change.

"These hypocritical holy men have devised all kinds of crooked schemes to become some of the wealthiest men on Earth while their people suffer," Pompeo said.

In a statement on Monday, National Security Adviser John Bolton sought to portray Trump's tweet as part of a broader, premeditated campaign to counter any acts of aggression by Iran, rather than threatening rhetoric alone. In his past role as a Fox News commentator and conservative scholar, Bolton openly advocated for military strikes against Iran and overthrow of the regime.

"I spoke to the President over the last several days, and President Trump told me that if Iran does anything at all to the negative, they will pay a price like few countries have ever paid before," Bolton said in a statement released by the White House.

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Trump's Iran Saber-Rattling Dates Back Nearly 40 Years (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Post

President Trump is back to threatening nuclear powers again; this time, it's Iran. In a late-night, ALL-CAPS tweet Sunday, Trump issued his strongest threat to date against the country, whose nuclear deal the United States left this year.

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE &

DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

But while it was his strongest threat as president, Trump has a long history of musing about war with Iran — dating back decades, in fact. And a lot of his past commentary has eerie parallels to today.

For much of the middle part of Barack Obama's presidency, Trump predicted that Obama would go to war with Iran in the name of winning reelection. But he has also outright talked about going to war there himself and even seemed to suggest it would be a legacy item if he ever became president.

Trump's commentary on Iran dates to the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, when he said the United States should have rescued the hostage by force. But he went even further, suggesting the United States should have toppled the regime and taken its oil.

"I absolutely feel that [the U.S. should have sent troops], yes," Trump told gossip columnist Rona Barrett in 1980. "I don't think there's any question, and there is no question in my mind. I think right now we'd be an oil-rich nation, and I believe that we should have done it, and I'm very disappointed that we didn't do it, and I don't think anybody would have held us in abeyance."

Trump added, "That would have been the easiest victory we would have ever won, in my opinion."

Trump in 2011 began floating his theory about Obama invading Iran — but he also suggested that he as president might do the same.

"I would never take the military card off the table, and it's possible that it will have to be used, because Iran cannot have nuclear weapons," Trump said in a November 2011 video from his office. "But you've got to exhaust other possibilities."

He even seemed to suggest in a 2011 interview with Bill O'Reilly that invading Iran might bolster his military credentials if he ever became president.

"Look, I am the strongest military person," Trump said, "and if I have Iran and won, I would be the strongest military president ever."

Trump in 2011 also said of a remote-control spying drone the Iranians captured that Obama should have "taken it out."

Why did @BarackObama let Iran keep our drone? Now it is going straight to the Chinese. He should have taken it out.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) December 12, 2011

In 2012, he said the United States could "blow them away to the Stone Age."

We should be able to negotiate a deal with Iran because they know we could blow them away to the Stone Age. They just don't believe we would.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 16, 2012

And in 2013, Trump floated invading Iran as an alternative to striking Syria. He also talked about threatening military force to rescue jailed Christian pastor Saeed Abedini.

While everyone is waiting and prepared for us to attack Syria, maybe we should knock the hell out of Iran and their nuclear capabilities?— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 5, 2013

Tell Iran to let our Christian Pastor go--and I mean right now. If they don't, there will be hell to pay.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 27, 2013

But most of Trump's commentary on this issue has to do with his bizarre — and ultimately disproved — theory that Obama was preparing to go to war with Iran for political purposes.

"Our president will start a war with Iran because he has absolutely no ability to negotiate," Trump said in a 2011 video blog. "He's weak and he's ineffective. So the only way he figures that he's going to get reelected — as sure as you're sitting there — is to start a war with Iran."

"So I believe that he will attack Iran sometime prior to the election, because he thinks that's the only way he can get elected. Isn't it pathetic?"

Trump tweeted about this relentlessly.

Just as I predicted, @BarackObama is preparing a possible attack on Iran right before November. <http://t.co/lSaJp1xo>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 3, 2012

Now that Obama's poll numbers are in tailspin – watch for him to launch a strike in Libya or Iran. He is desperate.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 9, 2012

@BarackObama will attack Iran in the not too distant future because it will help him win the election. If the... (cont) <http://t.co/WEJd30pR>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 14, 2011

In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 29, 2011

I always said @BarackObama will attack Iran, in some form, prior to the election.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 16, 2012

Remember what I said about @BarackObama attacking Iran before the election—I hope the Iranians are not so (cont) <http://t.co/0uQsm9t4>— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) April 4, 2012

Don't let Obama play the Iran card in order to start a war in order to get elected--be careful Republicans!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 22, 2012

@Israel could very well be close to attacking Iran. Could be this election's big October surprise...— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) August 16, 2012

When it didn't happen as he predicted before the 2012 election, Trump continued to wager that it would eventually happen — albeit for other political reasons.

Remember what I previously said--Obama will someday attack Iran in order to show how tough he is.— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 25, 2013

I predict that President Obama will at some point attack Iran in order to save face!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 16, 2013

Remember that I predicted a long time ago that President Obama will attack Iran because of his inability to negotiate properly-not skilled!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 11, 2013

But despite repeatedly warning that Obama would get us stuck in a war with Iran, Trump as president has repeatedly rattled his own saber.

Within two weeks of his inauguration, in another tweet featuring some ALL CAPS, he suggestively put Iran "ON NOTICE." The next day, he said Iran was "playing with fire."

Iran has been formally PUT ON NOTICE for firing a ballistic missile. Should have been thankful for the terrible deal the U.S. made with them!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 2, 2017

Iran is playing with fire — they don't appreciate how "kind" President Obama was to them. Not me!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 3, 2017

And early this year, he suggested that Americans might lend some undefined assistance to protesters of the Iranian government.

Such respect for the people of Iran as they try to take back their corrupt government. You will see great support from the United States at the appropriate time!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) January 3, 2018

It's tempting to compare Trump's Iran strategy to his "madman" North Korea strategy, given he pledged to "totally destroy" and inflict "fire and fury" upon Kim Jong Un's regime before sitting down at the negotiating table. And perhaps this is a similar amount of posturing.

But it's also worth noting that Trump has long spoken about war with Iran in pretty cavalier terms — and in ways that

make lodging this threat midway through his first term somewhat difficult to completely dismiss as hot air.

In Iran, unlike North Korea:

1. Military options may look attractive to Trump.
2. Belief in administration that actively pushing for regime change is a good idea.
3. Obama pushed rapprochement.

In other words, much more likely to get escalation.— ian bremmer (@ianbremmer) July 23, 2018

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Should We Be Anticipating War With Iran? No, But It Could Get Nasty (Gladstone, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Rick Gladstone

The escalating invective between President Trump and Iran's leaders, reminiscent of the president's bombastic exchanges with North Korea, have raised fears of a military confrontation in the Persian Gulf — a vital conduit for global oil supplies — or perhaps even something bigger.

In a late-night Twitter message, Mr. Trump warned President Hassan Rouhani of Iran in all-capital letters of apocalyptic consequences if his country threatened the United States, increasing tensions to a new level. "BE CAUTIOUS!" Mr. Trump wrote. Oil prices surged briefly on worries about potential supply disruptions.

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!

Many analysts of Iranian politics viewed Mr. Trump's message as part of an intimidation gambit, more than an actual threat. Few said they were predicting a war between Iran and the United States, partly because Iran's hierarchy is well aware that its forces are vastly outgunned by an American military that would have air and naval dominance. Still, nobody is ruling out an armed clash or another form of Iranian response, like a cyberattack, to send Mr. Trump a defiant message.

"I don't think either side wants war," said Cliff Kupchan, chairman of the Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy in Washington. However, Mr. Kupchan said, "the Iranians are playing with a different fish — this guy bites — and that

means we're entering a potentially escalatory phase, and that's a real risk."

Here are answers to some basic questions about the latest face-off between Iran and the United States:

Mr. Trump's critics say he has surrounded himself with like-minded right-wing ideologues, most notably John R. Bolton, his national security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, his secretary of state, who would like to see regime change in Iran and were happy in May when he scrapped American participation in the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran negotiated by Mr. Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama.

Some political analysts say Mr. Trump believes his threats of escalation against Iran may force Iranian leaders to seek negotiations with him to address what he considered fatal flaws in the nuclear deal, in which Iran pledged to never acquire atomic bombs. Mr. Trump has repeatedly congratulated himself for — in his view — having successfully executed such a pressure strategy against North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, describing it as critical to Mr. Kim's decision to halt testing nuclear bombs and missiles and engage with Mr. Trump in a summit meeting last month in Singapore.

Relations with Iran have been combustible ever since the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the American-backed shah. But the basis for the current spike in tensions lay at least in part in the 2016 election of Mr. Trump, who has embraced the position held by Israel and Saudi Arabia, America's closest Middle East allies, that Iran is an implacable enemy bent on becoming a nuclear-armed state.

In repudiating the 2015 nuclear agreement, Mr. Trump has reimposed and intensified nuclear-related economic sanctions on Iran, warning other countries to stop buying Iranian oil, the country's most important export, or risk economic penalties from the United States. He has included Iran on a list of mostly Muslim countries subject to an American travel ban. He has placed Iran's central bank governor on a terrorism blacklist. His administration has described Iran's clerical hierarchy as an irredeemably corrupt kleptocracy, and has cheered Iranians who have protested Iran's political repressions and increasingly dire economic problems.

The American threat to Iran's oil exports has hit a particular nerve in Iran's leadership, which has said it may close the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway to the Persian Gulf that accounts for up to 40 percent of oil tanker traffic, if Iran's oil sales are curtailed.

On Sunday, Mr. Rouhani told Iranian diplomats in Tehran that Mr. Trump risked "the mother of all wars" with Iran and admonished him not to "play with the lion's tail," which may

have been the catalyst for the ferocity of Mr. Trump's Twitter response hours later.

Opinions about American relations with Iran are so polarized it is difficult to speculate. But analysts who have long studied Iran expressed strong doubts that its leaders would capitulate to American pressure.

"A regime that for 40 years has said 'Death to America' cannot, in the context of president Trump's aggressive policies, back down," said Houchang Hassan-Yari, a political-science professor at Queen's University and Royal Military College in Ontario, Canada. "They have to stand against the American position."

Others said the Trump administration might be underestimating the tenacity of the Iranian system, which has an extensive apparatus for quelling internal political threats. There is little sign that dissidents in Iran can do more than carry out scattered protests. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the paramilitary force that is intensely loyal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, wields enormous economic and political influence.

There is little question that the United States would prevail in a conventional war, an outcome not lost on the Iranians when the United States quickly toppled the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and routed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan.

Just judging by statistics, the conventional United States military dwarfs Iran's in every way. There are roughly 1.3 million active American military personnel, nearly triple that of Iran. Annual military spending by the United States exceeded \$600 billion last year, versus about \$16 billion in Iran. The Americans have nearly 6,000 tanks, versus fewer than 1,700 in Iran. The aerial and naval forces of the United States — more than 13,000 aircraft and nearly 300 battle vessels — vastly outnumber Iran's.

That does not mean Mr. Trump is ready to back his threats by invading Iran — such a possibility, on the contrary, is seen as nonexistent. Mr. Trump has said he wants to get the United States out of foreign military entanglements, and Americans have shown little appetite for another war.

"I don't see an actual war — it's not in anyone's interest," said Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based research group. "Trump doesn't even want to keep boots on the ground in Syria."

A possible point of conflict is the Strait of Hormuz, where speedboats of the Revolutionary Guards have occasionally harassed American Fifth Fleet warships that patrol the waterway. In an emailed advisory to clients, Mr. Kupchan

said, "War is not imminent, but the probability of an escalatory incident in the Strait of Hormuz is increasing."

The strait has been the backdrop for violent confrontations before. In April 1988, United States naval forces sank three Iranian warships and destroyed two oil platforms after an American frigate was struck by an Iranian mine. Three months later, the American warship Vincennes fired missiles that downed a civilian Iranian jetliner that the Americans say they mistook for a warplane, killing 290 people aboard.

Some analysts speculated privately that Mr. Trump might be eager to avenge what he saw as an American humiliation in January of 2016 — a few days before the nuclear agreement took effect — when Revolutionary Guards seized 10 American sailors from two patrol boats and disseminated photos of them in captivity before they were released.

For their part, Iranian officials have shown no sign that Mr. Trump's latest Twitter threat has frightened them. Rather, some have treated it with sarcasm.

Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's American-educated foreign minister and a frequent Twitter user himself, offered this retort on Monday afternoon: "We've been around for millennia & seen fall of empires, incl our own, which lasted more than the life of some countries. BE CAUTIOUS!"

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A Hail Mary Operation To Save White Helmet Volunteers In Syria (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The call came on Saturday night. In the raging war zone that is southwestern Syria, with enemy forces on the march, the 98 White Helmets volunteers brought their spouses, children and a personal bag each. A total of 421 people massed at two collection points where they were to make their crossing to safety.

By the time they crossed, they were 422. One woman went into labor, requiring an emergency C-section. Her son, Nairouz, came into the world in an open field under the darkness of night just short of the frontier with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It was just one moment of drama in a complicated international rescue operation to extract the Syrian volunteer rescuers who work in opposition areas through their country's bitter enemy Israel by bus to a temporary haven in Jordan.

It was a nail-biting trip to a crossing over one of the most tightly sealed frontiers in the world. Up until the last minute, those on the ground were uncertain the operation would go through.

Another nearly 400 people were meant to be pulled out as well. Most didn't make it in time to the assembly points, unable to go through roads that were closing fast by the advancing Syrian forces on one side and the expanding Islamic State militants on the other.

In all, it took about six hours to complete the evacuation, according to a person close to the operation who agreed to discuss the details on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

"It was a Hail Mary operation," said the person familiar with the evacuation. "The only place of safety was through their evacuation" to Jordan.

The operation was conceived by Britain, Germany and Canada and supported by Israel, Jordan, the United States, and the U.N. It took an unprecedented level of agreement and coordination — something international players have rarely demonstrated during eight years of war in Syria that have pitted world powers against one another.

The rescue of the besieged White Helmets was not without controversy.

It raised questions about the fate of 3,000 other White Helmets still operating in opposition-held northern Syria, living with other 1 million other displaced civilians in areas where the government is expected to target next.

The Syrian government denounced the evacuation as a "criminal process" that "smuggled terrorists" whom it blamed for undermining the country's security for years. A Syrian Foreign Ministry official repeated his government's accusations that the White Helmets staged and executed chemical attacks to blame Damascus.

The White Helmets is an organization of volunteers that since 2013 took on the task of rescuing the survivors and salvaging the dead in war-ravaged held areas, whether digging them from under the rubble of bombed buildings or pulling victims of chemical attacks from site. It has had Western backing and funding, and its work brought it a Nobel Prize nomination. The government waged a virulent campaign depicting them as agents and terrorists because its volunteers helped document atrocities by government forces and their allies.

In five years of operations, over 3,000 volunteers saved more than 115,000 lives, according to the White Helmets. The cost for the group has been high, with one in four of its volunteers wounded or killed.

The plan was conceived in Europe and Canada about two weeks ago.

The Syrian government offensive in the southwest, backed by Russia, unfolded in mid-June. Though it condemned the assault, Washington, which along with Jordan had backed

armed groups in the area and sponsored the White Helmets, signaled it wouldn't help stop the advances.

By early July, government forces began negotiating surrender deals with armed groups and civilians in villages and towns that were fast crumbling under the assault. The negotiations allowed those who refused to live under government control — whether armed fighters, civilians or activists — to evacuate to the north.

Except for the White Helmets, said the person close to the planning.

Government officials and Russian representatives said the White Helmets were "a red line" who should be "eradicated," the source said.

This threat was particularly acute, he said, because during previous evacuations from fallen opposition areas elsewhere, nearly a dozen White Helmets volunteers were specifically targeted, pulled from buses, tortured and filmed making false confessions about being paid agents. They were even filmed with weapons to support the government's narrative that they work closely with the armed groups.

"It was a pattern of behavior," he said.

The discussions about the White Helmets' safety started among Britain, Germany and Canada before the NATO summit on July 9. At the summit, there were leader-to-leader meetings over the issue.

Evacuating them through Jordan quickly became impossible as government forces advanced, seizing a vital border crossing from the rebels and then deploying along the border. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he agreed to let them cross through Israel, after an appeal from President Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Finding the volunteers in the fast-changing battlefield was a challenge. Conscious not to raise expectations, the planners only asked the volunteers whether they would accept an opportunity to evacuate through Israel.

Some declined, the source said, fearing they had no guarantees where they would end up. The leadership of the White Helmets was unanimous in accepting, despite the likelihood the government would point to the Israel route in propaganda against them.

"The political ramifications had to be secondary to saving what is to be saved," the source said.

There was an unexpected twist: advances by an affiliate of the Islamic State group. As rebel forces retreated and surrendered in many villages between Dara and Quneitra provinces, it was the Islamic State affiliate — not government forces — that moved in.

This changed the landscape again, blocking some escape routes to the evacuation points.

One civil defense volunteer said before Saturday night that many of his colleagues were locked in areas seized by the government and the militants.

"In our minds, there were no guarantees this evacuation was going to happen until it happened," the source said.

The small window was quickly closing. On Saturday night, the call came.

The evacuees congregated at two points in the northern end of the frontier.

Again, there was a problem.

A wife of one volunteer went into labor as the call was issued. "We were worried she won't make it," the source said.

An emergency C-section was performed on the Syrian side in a field near the frontier. "In a couple of hours, she was evacuated to the other side with a healthy baby boy" — Nairouz.

The evacuees crossed on foot and were received on the other side by Israeli soldiers, who verified their identities and took them in buses to one of the two crossings into Jordan.

"The rescuers were rescued," the source said.

Germany, Canada and Britain said they will resettle the White Helmets and their families within three months. The U.S. and Jordan will not take any in.

The planners are still in touch with the volunteers who didn't make it out, advising them on what to do and where to be safe.

It is unclear whether a similar operation can be produced. As for the hundred other volunteers in northern Syria, the source said the geography and landscape are different, with Turkish forces present in the area and far more options than the southwest, with firmly sealed frontiers from all sides.

In a statement Monday night, the White Helmets thanked "all governments who contributed" to the evacuation and asked the international community — if it won't act to end Syrian offensives — to "do more to help the hundreds of thousands remaining in southern Syria."

But the international players appear unlikely to pull together that will again.

"A great many factors and partners had to interact in the right way," German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said.

Pressed whether the action set a precedent for further world help in evacuations, he said: "The factors that made it

possible in this case to help in this way people who faced an acute threat, a very specific group, cannot be reproduced at will."

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Syrian President Receives South Ossetia Leader In Damascus (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad welcomed the head of Russia-backed breakaway region South Ossetia to Damascus on Monday, the presidency said, two months after recognising the region as separate from Georgia.

"Assad receives Anatoly Bibilov, the president of the Republic of South Ossetia, on a three-day visit," the presidency announced in a statement.

Syria has been a close ally of Russia for decades, but bonds have grown since Moscow intervened militarily in 2015 to back Assad's troops in the country's civil war.

Assad said the "visit and South Ossetia's support for Syria in it protecting its sovereignty and unity confirm that Syria is right in looking towards the countries of the East", the presidency said.

The latter "respect the basis and principles of international law, contrary to most of the West, which knows nothing except the politics of dictation".

In May, Syria recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent from the former Soviet state of Georgia, prompting Tbilisi to cut diplomatic ties with Damascus.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are internationally recognised as part of Georgia, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but Russia and a handful of other countries recognise their independence.

Russia waged a brief war with Georgia in 2008 over the two regions and has stationed thousands of troops there.

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Russian FM Meets Netanyahu In Jerusalem Over Syria, Iran (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Jerusalem with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday in talks focusing on the Iranian presence in Syria.

Early in his meeting with the Russian delegation, also attended by Israeli defense officials, Netanyahu stressed the "extraordinarily important" link between the two countries, demonstrated by "the direct meetings between myself and President Putin and between our staffs."

Netanyahu announced earlier at a Cabinet meeting that Russian President Vladimir Putin had a few days ago requested the meeting with the high level delegation that includes Russia's chief of the military's General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov.

Netanyahu said they were to discuss regional developments with "the situation in Syria being first and foremost."

He said he would reiterate Israel's position that it expects Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Iranian-backed allies to honor the 1974 agreement which sets out a demilitarized zone along their shared frontier, and that Israel will continue to act to stop its archenemy Iran from establishing a permanent military presence in Syria.

Israeli media reported that the teams discussed a Russian proposal that would see any forces linked to Iran distanced some 100 kilometers (62 miles) away from the Golan Heights.

Israel's main concern is to keep Iran, which is fighting alongside the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad, as far away from its border as possible — along with its proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah and other militia.

Russia, a key Assad ally, has warned it would be unrealistic to expect Iran to fully withdraw from the country.

Monday's meeting comes about two weeks after Netanyahu and Putin discussed Syria and Iran in Moscow.

Hours before the meeting Israel activated a missile defense system against rockets from the fighting in Syria it believed were heading its way.

The incident came after Israel earlier this month, twice in the same week, fired a Patriot missile at an unmanned aircraft that approached the country's border from Syria.

In June, Israel fired a missile at a drone that approached its airspace near the Syrian frontier.

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Syria Blasts U.S., Israel For Evacuating 'Terrorist' White Helmet Rescuers (Bacon, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By John Bacon

The Syrian government of President Bashar Assad on Monday blasted Israel, the United States and other nations for evacuating hundreds of Syrian Civil Defense “White Helmet” rescue workers and their families from Assad’s advancing forces.

The rescue was organized by Israel, which has otherwise avoided direct intervention in the brutal civil war ravaging its eastern neighbor.

“Words are not enough to express the discontent which the Syrians feel towards these mean conspiracies and the limitless support provided by the Western states, Israel and Jordan to the White Helmets ... and other terrorist organizations,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The White Helmets are lauded in the West, credited for saving thousands of civilians from the onslaught of Syrian troops and their allies driving Western-backed rebel groups from what were once rebel strongholds.

The search and rescue team has long claimed neutrality, but Syria, Russia and Iran dismiss the group as a propaganda arm of the rebels. Despite the evacuation effort, hundreds remain in Syria.

Assad’s forces recently overwhelmed rebel areas bordering Jordan and Golan Heights, Syrian territory occupied by Israel.

“It is pretty clear that Assad is winning the Syrian civil war – decisively,” said James Piazza, a Penn State professor and Middle East expert. “I think it is likely he will completely crush the rebels sooner rather than later.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said President Donald Trump, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and others requested Israel’s assistance in the evacuations of “people who have saved lives and whose lives were in danger.”

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt called the evacuations “fantastic news,” and the Trump administration said it “deeply appreciates” Israel’s role and Jordan’s “generosity.”

“We are glad that these brave volunteers, who have saved thousands of lives, are now out of harm’s way,” said State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert in a statement. “The White Helmets have consistently been targeted by the Assad regime.”

She said the evacuees, more than half of whom are children, were allowed entry into Jordan temporarily. Plans call for the evacuees to be placed in “permanent homes” in Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom, Nauert said.

The civil war in Syria has dragged on for more than seven years, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and an

unrelenting humanitarian crisis. A Syrian offensive that began last month has battered the few remaining rebel holdouts, and Assad continues to solidify gains and his power.

Netanyahu met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Jerusalem Monday. Israeli media said the prime minister pressed for, among other things, keeping pro-Iranian forces in Syria at least 60 miles from the Israeli border.

Russia’s support has been key to Assad’s survival and the all but certain defeat of the rebels. Piazza said Putin has made Syria the showpiece of its resurrection as a global superpower – and a player in the Middle East.

“It is hard to remember that at one time, in 2011, many policymakers and commentators regarded Assad as a dead man walking,” Piazza said. “Assad’s regime is in very good shape in terms of taking control over the remainder of the country.”

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Syria Blasts Evacuation Of White Helmets As ‘Criminal’ (Issa, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Philip Issa

The Syrian government on Monday condemned a multilateral operation to evacuate hundreds of rescue workers from the war-torn country as a “criminal process” intended to destabilize Syria.

Syrian authorities have long described the Civil Defense search-and-rescue group, which are popularly known as the White Helmets, as a terror organization.

The group rose to prominence as it filmed its operations to rescue civilians from Syrian government airstrikes in the country’s brutal civil war. The government has alleged the group stages videos. Damascus’s ally Russia has accused the group of staging chemical weapons attacks on civilians and blaming them on the government, a charge that has never been proven.

On Saturday, more than 400 rescuers and their family members were evacuated from Syria’s Quneitra province through Israel to Jordan, after the rebels surrendered the last areas they held in the southwestern province to the government.

Syria’s foreign ministry called it a “smuggling operation” that was evidence of a Western conspiracy to overthrow the government. The White Helmets have financial backing from the U.S., Britain, and other nations.

The unprecedented operation was spearheaded by the U.S., Canada, and Britain, The Associated Press reported on Friday.

The rescuers and their families are expected to be resettled in Europe and Canada.

Germany's Interior Ministry confirmed on Monday that the country would give asylum to eight rescuers and 39 family members.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said on Sunday giving the rescue workers shelter "is a humanitarian obligation," adding that more than 250 White Helmets have been killed in the war since 2013. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was quoted as saying that "the efforts of the White Helmets deserve admiration and respect."

Germany has provided the group with 12 million euros (\$14 million) in funding since 2016.

Meanwhile, Jordanian government spokeswoman Jumana Ghunaimat said her country has not been asked to receive another group of White Helmets.

Ghunaimat also said Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, on Sunday discussed "preliminary ideas" about the possible return of Syrian refugees to their homeland, but that "we cannot talk about return while the crisis in Syria is not yet over."

"Jordan is willing and encouraging the return when tension calms down because the refugees constitute a heavy burden on the kingdom in the light of the international community's inability to cover the costs," she said.

More than 5 million people have fled Syria during its seven-year-long civil war, according to the U.N.

Last week, Russia's Defense Ministry said it proposed to the United States the creation of a joint group, along with Jordan, to organize refugee returns. The group would be linked to a U.S.-Russian-Jordanian center set up last year in Jordan for monitoring a cease-fire in southwest Syria, said Major-General Milkahil Mizintsev.

"Active progress in this direction is promoted by the agreements reached" last week by President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at their summit in Finland, he said Friday.

He added that "specific proposals have been sent to the American side for organizing work on the return of refugees to their places of permanent residence."

A similar operation would be established in Lebanon, he said.

Lebanon's National News Agency reported Monday that hundreds of refugees return to Syria from Lebanon. It is the latest in a string of returns this year. President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement party has put refugee returns near the top of its political agenda.

The National News Agency said 850 Syrians living around the border town of Arsal were repatriated on Monday.

Close to one million Syrians are registered with the U.N.'s refugee agency in Lebanon. The agency, the UNHCR, says it is not organizing returns to Syria. It says refugees should not be coerced into returning.

Also Monday, Israel said it fired a pair of missiles to intercept two missiles fired from Syria in Israel's direction. It said the Syrian missiles landed inside Syrian territory just short of the Golan Heights, which have been occupied by Israel since 1967.

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For Trapped Syrian Rescuers, An Elaborately Planned Escape (El Deeb, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Sarah El Deeb

The call came on Saturday night. In the raging war zone that is southwestern Syria, with enemy forces on the march, the 98 White Helmets volunteers brought their spouses, children and a personal bag each. A total of 421 people massed at two collection points where they were to make their crossing to safety.

By the time they crossed, they were 422. One woman went into labor, requiring an emergency C-section. Her son, Nairouz, came into the world in an open field under the darkness of night just short of the frontier with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It was just one moment of drama in a complicated international rescue operation to extract the Syrian volunteer rescuers who work in opposition areas through their country's bitter enemy Israel by bus to a temporary haven in Jordan.

It was a nail-biting trip to a crossing over one of the most tightly sealed frontiers in the world. Up until the last minute, those on the ground were uncertain the operation would go through.

Another nearly 400 people were meant to be pulled out as well. Most didn't make it in time to the assembly points, unable to go through roads that were closing fast by the

advancing Syrian forces on one side and the expanding Islamic State militants on the other.

In all, it took about six hours to complete the evacuation, according to a person close to the operation who agreed to discuss the details on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

"It was a 'Hail Mary' operation," said the person familiar with the evacuation. "The only place of safety was through their evacuation" to Jordan.

The operation was conceived by Britain, Germany and Canada and supported by Israel, Jordan, the United States, and the U.N. It took an unprecedented level of agreement and coordination — something international players have rarely demonstrated during eight years of war in Syria that have pitted world powers against one another.

The rescue of the besieged White Helmets was not without controversy.

It raised questions about the fate of 3,000 other White Helmets still operating in opposition-held northern Syria, living with other 1 million other displaced civilians in areas where the government is expected to target next.

The Syrian government denounced the evacuation as a "criminal process" that "smuggled terrorists" whom it blamed for undermining the country's security for years. A Syrian Foreign Ministry official repeated his government's accusations that the White Helmets staged and executed chemical attacks to blame Damascus.

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In five years of operations, over 3,000 volunteers saved more than 115,000 lives, according to the White Helmets. The cost for the group has been high, with one in four of its volunteers wounded or killed.

The plan was conceived in Europe and Canada about two weeks ago.

The Syrian government offensive in the southwest, backed by Russia, unfolded in mid-June. Though it condemned the assault, Washington, which along with Jordan had backed armed groups in the area and sponsored the White Helmets, signaled it wouldn't help stop the advances.

By early July, government forces began negotiating surrender deals with armed groups and civilians in villages and towns that were fast crumbling under the assault. The negotiations allowed those who refused to live under government control — whether armed fighters, civilians or activists — to evacuate to the north.

Except for the White Helmets, said the person close to the planning.

Government officials and Russian representatives said the White Helmets were "a red line" who should be "eradicated," the source said.

This threat was particularly acute, he said, because during previous evacuations from fallen opposition areas elsewhere, nearly a dozen White Helmets volunteers were specifically targeted, pulled from buses, tortured and filmed making false confessions about being paid agents. They were even filmed with weapons to support the government's narrative they work closely with the armed groups.

"It was a pattern of behavior," he said.

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Evacuating them through Jordan quickly became impossible as government forces advanced, seizing a vital border crossing from the rebels and then deploying along the border. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he agreed to let them cross through Israel, after an appeal from U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

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"The political ramification had to be secondary to saving what is to be saved," the source said.

There was an unexpected twist: Advances by an affiliate of the Islamic State group. As rebel forces retreated and surrendered in many villages between Daraa and Quneitra provinces, it was the IS affiliate — not government forces — that moved in.

This changed the landscape again, blocking some escape routes to the evacuation points.

One civil defense volunteer said before Saturday night that many of his colleagues were locked in areas seized by the government and the militants.

"In our minds, there were no guarantees this evacuation was going to happen until it happened," the source said.

The small window was quickly closing. On the night of July 21, the call came.

The evacuees congregated at two points in the northern end of the frontier.

Again, there was a problem.

A wife of one volunteer went into labor as the call was issued. "We were worried she won't make it," the source said.

An emergency C-section was performed on the Syrian side in a field near the frontier. "In a couple of hours, she was evacuated to the other side with a healthy baby boy" — Nairouz.

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Hundreds Of Rescuers Still Stuck In South Syria After Evacuation (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Several hundred Syrian rescuers remain trapped in the country's south with no escape from approaching regime troops, two of them said Monday after a secret evacuation saved many of their colleagues.

Israel on Sunday helped more than 400 people — opposition-linked White Helmet rescue workers and their families — flee a neighbouring pocket of southwestern Syria as government forces bore down on them.

They were then taken to Jordan and will be resettled to western nations including France, Britain, Germany, and Canada.

"It was the only alternative for our trapped volunteers who would otherwise have faced detention or death at the hands of the Syrian regime and its ally Russia," the group said on Monday.

Ninety-eight male and female White Helmet volunteers were able to escape to Jordan with 324 members of their families, it said in a statement.

But a similar number remain trapped in southern Syria.

"We're calling on concerned parties to help us leave," said Cesar, a 23-year-old White Helmets worker in the southern city of Daraa.

He estimated some 400 fellow rescuers were still in the provinces of Daraa, bordering Jordan, and Quneitra, next to the buffer zone abutting the Israeli-annexed Golan.

Cesar said he had learned of the operation a few days ago "by chance", but when he contacted White Helmets leadership, they told him it was too late to register to leave.

– 'Made things worse' –

"They set another meeting for today on the subject, but we found out a little while ago that the efforts failed. The fact that some White Helmets members left and some stayed hurt us more than it helped us," he told AFP on Monday.

"Yesterday's evacuation through Israel only made things worse. We're afraid of the regime and Russia's reactions."

Russian-backed Syrian forces have been battering the south for more than a month in a bid to bring it back under government control.

The military push has damaged hospitals and civil defence centres, pushing hundreds of thousands to flee towards the Jordanian and Israeli borders, which remained sealed.

The foreign ministry in Damascus slammed the evacuation on Monday, calling it a "criminal operation" and repeating its accusation that the White Helmets were a front for "terrorists".

Moscow said it was "symbolic that the White Helmets preferred to flee Syria thanks to foreign support, thus revealing their true nature".

The 422 people evacuated will be allowed to stay in Jordan for three months before being resettled, Amman has said.

On Monday, the White Helmets called on the international community to help those left behind in southern Syria.

"We thank all governments who contributed to the success of this operation to rescue the rescuers, and we ask that they do more to help the hundreds of thousands remaining in southern Syria," they said.

- 'We're surrounded' –

White Helmets chief Raed Saleh said not all workers had been evacuated because some had not signed up to do so, while "some volunteers were not able to reach the evacuation point".

He said there were no plans for a second such operation.

"They pulled out the others but can't get us out?" asked 20-year-old rescuer Imad from a rebel village in Quneitra.

"We're surrounded," he said.

Imad also said there had been a meeting of White Helmets officials in Jordan on Monday to discuss the fate of the remaining rescuers.

After the meeting, the White Helmets members still in Syria were told their only option was to be bussed north to opposition-controlled territory under a surrender deal.

Last week, rebels in Quneitra agreed with Russia to give up their remaining territory in the province in exchange for an end to bombardment and safe passage to other rebel-held territory.

The terms are similar to previous deals that have brought swathes of Syria under government control.

But Imad told AFP he feared reprisals.

"We're a burnt card when it comes to the Syrian army – there won't be any mercy. Whoever the regime gets its hands on is lost, and no one knows what ends up happening to them," he said.

Founded in 2013, the Syria Civil Defence, or White Helmets, works to rescue those wounded by attacks in rebel-held territory.

The group receives funding from a number of Western governments and individual donors.

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After Painful Search, Syrians Learn Detained Relatives Are Long Dead (Gebeily, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Maya Gebeily

"That's it? You're sure he's dead?" Seven years had passed with no news, but Salwa could hardly believe her nephew, a Syrian activist arrested in 2011, had been dead the last five.

That's what the civil records employee in Salwa's native Hama, a central government-held city, declared last month after shuffling through papers at her desk.

"She told me, 'Yes, we received the names of everyone who died inside'" prison, Salwa told AFP, using a pseudonym because she fears reprisals in regime territory.

Tens of thousands of people are estimated to be held in government jails across Syria, with relatives and advocates saying they are often tortured, denied fair trial, and deprived contact with families.

Their relatives are left in limbo, spending years and precious savings shuttling between security services to know where loved ones are held or if they're even alive.

Now, activists and families of imprisoned Syrians say authorities have quietly updated civil records to mark detainees as "deceased", backdating deaths to as long ago as 2013.

Hearing of this through word of mouth, families of detained Syrians are flooding registries to ask: "Are they alive?"

For around 400 detainees in recent months, the answer has been "no", said Fadel Abdul Ghany, head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

The SNHR estimates 80,000 Syrians remain forcibly disappeared by the government.

"Before, the regime was giving no details on the detained. It wouldn't declare them dead," Abdul Ghany told AFP.

"Now it is, but in a barbaric way."

– ‘Scorched our hearts’ –

Hama’s records were updated first, followed by Homs, the capital Damascus, Latakia and Hasakeh, and new names are still arriving at registries, the SNHR said.

In seven years of documenting Syria’s uprising-turned-war, Abdul Ghany said he had never before seen families learn of the fate of the detainees in this way.

“Usually, you take a death certificate to the registry and inform them your relative is dead, not the other way around,” he said.

On that June morning, Salwa and her sister-in-law worried they’d be the only people at the registry asking about imprisoned relatives.

“But when we got there, we saw a line out the door,” she said.

“Most were women, mothers and sisters of detainees. Security forces stood among them, and every single woman was wiping her tears and covering her face with her scarf.”

Weeping, Salwa went home to hold a single day of hushed condolences for two nephews: Saad, arrested in 2011 and marked deceased in 2013, and Saeed, detained since 2012 and recorded to have died last year.

The family had no bodies to bury and was afraid of grieving publicly in a regime-held city.

“They scorched our hearts – those two boys were like roses. Even in mourning, we’re afraid and hide our grief,” Salwa said.

– ‘No going back’ –

The last time Islam Dabbas’s family saw him was late 2012, behind bars at a regime prison near Damascus.

“He wore a sweater that read ‘Just Freedom’. We stopped hearing anything a while after that,” recalled his brother Abdulrahman, who has since moved to Egypt.

This month, a relative still in Syria learned of the updated files and checked Islam’s.

“It said he died January 15, 2013 in Saydnaya,” Abdulrahman said.

Amnesty International has dubbed the infamous prison “the human slaughterhouse”, after reports of mass executions there.

“Honestly, it’s a relief. My mother told me, ‘He’s lucky. He’s at peace,’” Abdulrahman said.

They held condolences for Islam last week in Egypt, hundreds of kilometres (miles) from home and without a body.

Abdulrahman and his mother then broke the news by phone to his father, still in Syria serving out his own prison sentence.

But confirming what many long suspected is not enough, said Noura Ghazi, a Syrian lawyer and member of the detainee advocacy group Families for Freedom.

“OK, you’ve told us they’re dead, but we want to know where the bodies are. We want to know the real way they died,” Ghazi said.

Others are hesitating.

“People are so tired. Of course there’s denial. Others are suspicious, saying ‘Why would we believe this document is real? Or this date to be true?’” said Ghazi, who lives in Beirut.

Her husband, activist Bassel Khartabil, vanished after his October 3, 2015 arrest. In 2017, through her networks, Ghazi confirmed he died in regime detention.

“I held condolences for him, I wore black. I thought I had processed the truth,” she said.

That changed when a relative of Khartabil visited a Damascus registry in early July and saw the government’s freshly-recorded date of death: October 5, 2015.

“When we saw that, it’s like he died all over again,” said Ghazi.

“There’s no going back. For more than two years I fought to know his fate. Now I’ll be fighting my whole life to get his body.”

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Debate Over Surrogacy Draws Tens Of Thousands Of Israelis Into The Streets (Tarnopolsky, LAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Los Angeles Times](#)

By Noga Tarnopolsky

In an extraordinary public protest, tens of thousands of Israelis poured into the streets across the country Sunday to voice their displeasure with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Shame! Shame!” they shouted.

The issue was not Gaza policy or the controversial nation-state law favoring Jews over Arabs. It was the government’s refusal to pay for single men or gay male couples to have children using surrogates.

Israel’s welfare system has long paid for surrogacy for single women and married heterosexual couples who are unable to have children on their own. Typically, an embryo created

through in vitro fertilization is implanted in a woman who then carries the fetus to term.

Last Monday, Netanyahu announced that he'd support an amendment extending state subsidies for surrogacy to single men and gay couples — a move that apparently upset religious conservatives in his fragile coalition government.

Two days later in the parliament, or Knesset, he voted against it without explanation, and the amendment narrowly failed.

The protest began the same day, as members of the LGBTQ communities in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem gathered spontaneously to demonstrate. By Thursday, technology companies that have sustained Israel's reputation as the "start-up nation" had joined the cause.

Microsoft's Israel affiliate announced that it would pay 60,000 shekels, about \$16,500, for any gay employee to use a surrogate.

"My heart is with each and every employee in their desire to create a family," said Assaf Rappaport, the chief executive of Microsoft's research and development center in Israel.

IBM issued a statement Friday decrying the law: "No one should be denied one of the most basic human rights — the right to start a family — for being who they are. We support IBMers who wish to stand in solidarity with the LGBT community in advocating for legislation that is inclusive of ALL."

Dozens of other companies agreed to give their employees the day off on Sunday — normally a workday here — to protest. In Jerusalem, dozens of protesters blocked the square facing the prime minister's residence. In Haifa, protesters showed up with empty strollers.

A few hours before the start of Sunday's nationwide protests, Apple Inc. released a statement supporting the Israeli campaign.

"One of Israel's greatest gifts is the creativity, diversity and talent of all of its people," it said. "Unfortunately, recent legislation passed by the Knesset undermines those values. Apple will always maintain its values of fairness, dignity, and mutual respect, and we stand with all of our employees seeking equality under the law."

Even trade unions, which are traditionally conservative, granted their employees a day off, causing some delays at the national electric company and Ben Gurion International Airport.

Marching alongside thousands of protesters, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai said, "These people are protesting for something so basic, just human rights, against a government and a

prime minister who misleads us. This is apparently the moment when the straw broke the camel's back. There is an awakening."

Around him, marchers chanted, "Netanyahu! Homophobe! We are here, we are everywhere!"

The protest there morphed into a general outcry against several conservative laws passed last week before the start of a three-month summer recess. The most controversial was the nation-state law, which defines Israel as "the national home of the Jewish people" and downgrades Arabic from an official language to one with an undefined "special status."

As the magnitude of Sunday's protests became clear, senior Israeli officials began to signal the possibility of reversing course.

Minister of Culture Miri Regev, who voted against the amendment that would have paid for surrogacy for gay men, said in a television interview that the government would review the law.

"We mucked up with surrogacy," she said. "I regret that coalition obligations forced us to do so."

Netanyahu told gay rights leaders he would meet with them "in the coming days."

Itzik Shmuli, an opposition legislator who is gay, said the prime minister was "treating us as second-class citizens."

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Israel's Only Goods Crossing With Gaza To Partially Reopen (AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

Israel will partially reopen its only goods crossing with the blockaded Gaza Strip later Tuesday, a minister said, after closing it July 9 over border tensions and kites carrying firebombs to burn Israeli farmland.

"Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman decided that Kerem Shalom will partially reopen and as of today at 12:00 pm (0900 GMT) it will be possible to transfer gas and fuel into the Gaza Strip, in addition to food and medicine," Lieberman's office said.

The statement noted that the number of kites and balloons carrying firebombs into Israeli territory had been reduced but not totally eliminated.

It said the crossing could return to full activity soon "conditioned on the full cessation of fire-balloon launches and friction on the fence."

Israel says the devices have sparked hundreds of fires since April and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage.

Palestinians in Gaza see the kites and balloons as legitimate resistance against Israel's more than 10-year blockade.

The partial reopening follows urgent warnings from United Nations officials that emergency fuel supplies are running low in the Gaza Strip and that the shortage is starting to affect hospitals and water sanitation.

The coastal enclave suffers from a severe lack of electricity and relies on fuel-powered generators during outages that last hours at a time.

Israel and Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip, reached a ceasefire at the weekend following a major flare-up of violence on Friday.

Israel had carried out a wave of air strikes killing three Hamas militants after one of its soldiers was shot dead along the Gaza border.

There have been months of tension along the border, where mass protests and clashes began on March 30 and have continued at varying levels since then.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008.

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UN Rights Chief Sharply Criticizes Israel Over Gaza Killings (Lederer, AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

By Edith M. Lederer

The U.N. human rights chief sharply criticized Israel on Monday, calling recent killings by its soldiers during Palestinian demonstrations along the Gaza border fence "shocking" and saying living conditions inflicted by Israel's 11-year blockade of the territory are "grossly inadequate."

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a video address to the U.N. Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People that the situation in Gaza has escalated dramatically in recent months with "the potential to generate threats to peace across a far broader region."

Zeid, who heads the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said it is essential for all parties to cooperate with the independent, international commission of inquiry into the recent deadly events in Gaza that his office is helping to establish. It was authorized by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council on May 18 "to advance accountability for the killings and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, he said.

Zeid said there are "serious concerns" that Israeli accountability mechanisms don't comply with international standards of "independence, impartiality, and effectiveness."

"Very few investigations ever occur," he said. "In the rare cases where an investigation has led to an indictment, the sentence has been extremely lenient in light of the gravity of the crime committed."

Zeid said it is vital to address the root causes of the Gaza demonstrations, which have resulted in the deaths of over 100 Palestinians, including 17 children, and the wounding of more than 4,100 others with live ammunition since March 30.

In addition to "grossly inadequate living conditions" caused by Israel's blockade for the residents of Gaza, most of whom are refugees, restrictive measures have also been imposed by Egypt that have "exacerbated these conditions," Zeid said.

He added that the situation in Gaza may be "severely aggravated" in the coming months by the financial crisis facing the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, as a result of dramatic cuts to its budget by the Trump administration.

Zeid criticized last week's approval by Israel's parliament of a bill defining that country as the nation-state of the Jewish people. He said that it "anchors inherent discrimination against non-Jewish communities," most notably the Arab citizens of Israel and residents of occupied East Jerusalem. He warned that it "could also further inflame tensions."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the bill's passage a "historic moment in the history of Zionism and the history of the state of Israel," saying: "Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, which honors the individual rights of all its citizens."

Zeid also criticized Israel's approval, planning and construction of settlements across with West Bank and East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future state.

He called Israel's detention of hundreds of Palestinian children, some without charge, under a system of "administrative detention," a "fundamental human rights violation."

"It should be absolutely clear that international law requires detention only be used for children as a last resort," he said.

And whether for children or adults, Zeid said, detention without trial "contravenes Israel's obligations under international law."

"An estimated 440 Palestinians are being held in 'administrative detention,' according to the latest figures," he

said. "Israel should immediately charge, or release, all of them."

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UN Rights Chief Calls Out Israel Over Detained Palestinian Kids (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

The United Nations rights chief on Monday demanded that Israel either give more than 400 detained Palestinian children their day in court or release them, decrying "assaults" on Palestinians' rights.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein criticized the "administrative detention" system under which Israel is currently holding an estimated 440 children.

"Israel should immediately charge, or release, all of them," the Geneva-based Zeid said via videolink, calling Israel's system a "fundamental human rights violation."

"It should be absolutely clear that international law requires detention only be used for children as a last resort," he said.

"And whether for children or for adults, detention without trial, on evidence that is often kept secret, under often indefinitely renewable administrative detention orders, contravenes Israel's obligations under international law, and must come to an end."

The meeting focused on recent violence in the Gaza Strip, which is to the UN Security Council is set to take up Tuesday during a regular monthly session on the Middle East.

Zeid also criticized what he called Israel's arbitrary detention and arrest of rights activists.

The Gaza Strip, controlled by Islamist movement Hamas, has been under an Israeli blockade for more than 10 years.

But since late March, that blockade has sparked a vast protest movement along the border with Israel that has left at least 149 Palestinians and one Israeli soldier dead.

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Western Wall Stone Crashes Down In Jerusalem (AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

Jerusalem authorities restricted access to one of Judaism's holiest sites on Monday after a massive stone block from the

Western Wall fell to the ground below, narrowly missing a worshipper.

"The stone, weighing 100 kilogrammes (220 pounds), fell close to a woman who was praying... without hitting her," Mayor Nir Barkat said in a statement.

He said the fact that nobody was harmed in the incident was "a great miracle".

Barkat visited the scene with Jerusalem's city engineer and safety officials, who declared the spot dangerous and closed it to the public pending further inspection.

Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz said he could not explain the incident but the fact it happened a day after a major gathering at the Western Wall called for "soul-searching".

On Sunday, tens of thousands of Jewish worshippers thronged the main, gender-segregated Western Wall esplanade for annual prayers mourning the razing of the Jews' biblical-era temples.

Monday's incident struck a less-visited part of the wall, where men and women are permitted to pray together contrary to Orthodox Jewish practise.

Rabinowitz noted that the stones above the main prayer section of the Western Wall are examined by professionals twice a year.

The Western Wall, in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, is the holiest place at which Jews are allowed to pray.

They believe it is what remains of a supporting wall of their biblical second temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

Immediately above it is the flashpoint shrine known to Jews as the Temple Mount, the holiest in Judaism, revered as the spot where the two biblical Jewish temples once stood.

To Muslims it is the Haram al-Sharif compound, the third-holiest in Islam after Mecca and Medina, and home to the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

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Gunmen Attack Government Building In Northern Iraq (Coles, Nabhan, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Isabel Coles And Ali Nabhan

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Qatar To Upgrade Air Base Used By U.S. To Fight Terrorism (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018
Washington Post

Qatar will spend \$1.8 billion upgrading the major air base used by the United States for its ongoing military and counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf kingdom said Monday.

Expansion of the base, which houses about 10,000 U.S. military personnel, will include new family housing facilities for more than 200 officers and other infrastructure enlargements, along with “operational” improvements, Defense Minister Khaled Mohammed al-Attiyah said in an interview.

The improvements, to be formally announced at a groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday, were previewed this year in meetings between Attiyah and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. They come as Qatar and its gulf rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are in the midst of a deep regional dispute and competing for closer relations with the United States.

Last summer, fresh from a triumphant visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump sided with the Saudis and Emiratis when they broke relations with Qatar and accused it of ties to terrorism. By fall, however, Trump backed off after Mattis and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that it was unwise to take sides in what was a long-standing rivalry, and reminded him of U.S. military interests in Qatar.

Since then, he has repeatedly called on them to mend their differences and offered to mediate. Last April, when Trump hosted a visit by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar was described as a “valued partner and longtime friend” that provided “critical support” for operations against the Islamic State.

Qatar is also viewed as a major donor to administration plans to provide development assistance to Gaza and the West Bank as part of a still-unrevealed U.S. plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar is a major customer for the U.S. defense industry, including last year’s purchase of \$12 billion worth of F-15s. “We have bought a lot of military equipment from the U.S. so we can fly hand in hand with our partners,” Attiya said.

He dismissed any notion of regional rivalry, saying that Qatar is “not very much interested in rivalry” but rather was interested in “the stability of the region.”

According to a background statement from the Qatar government, the contract for 36 F-15 fighter jets “supports 50,000 total jobs and more than 550 suppliers in 42 states.” Other recent purchases include \$20 million worth of Javelin guided missiles, \$700 million in logistics support services and

equipment, and an estimated \$200 million in weapons systems “which support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States.”

But the centerpiece of U.S.-Qatar ties is Al Udeid Air Base, home to scores of aircraft, including fighters, bombers, tankers and reconnaissance planes.

The base is key to U.S. military efforts in the Middle East and has played a central role in the Pentagon’s air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In addition to the large U.S. troop presence, it is also the headquarters of Air Forces Central Command, headed by a three-star U.S. general, and a combined air operations center from which the Pentagon tracks the maneuvers of aircraft throughout the region.

The U.S. military relationship with Qatar expanded rapidly in the 1990s and early part of the 21st century, as the Qatars built Al Udeid and encouraged the United States to use it. The Pentagon moved its air operations center there from Saudi Arabia in 2003, after Riyadh denied the United States permission to use its Prince Sultan Air Base to attack Iraq.

Qatar’s willingness to let the United States fly bombers from Al Udeid is seen as particularly significant. Other nations in the region do not allow bombers, but the Pentagon has had a steady rotation of bomber squadrons through the base. A unit of B-1B bombers arrived this spring, replacing B-52s that carried out airstrikes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria over the previous two years.

The U.S. military has spent about \$450 million in construction at Al Udeid since 2003, expanding the facility from an expeditionary airfield in which many U.S. troops lived in tents to the more permanent structures there today. Qatar calculates it has spent \$8 billion there to support U.S. operations.

The U.S. presence at Tuesday’s ceremony is expected to be relatively low-level, as defense officials try to distance themselves from the ongoing inter-gulf dispute.

Attiya said that Qatar hoped eventually to see Al Udeid declared a permanent American facility.

“Of course we would like to see our colleagues and allies permanently staying here with us,” Attiya said. But the main purpose of the expansion, he said, “is that we have men and women away from home and we are trying always to modify and expand, just to make their stay comfortable.”

Over the next five years, Qatar is also building two major new “top-of-the-line” naval bases, Attiyah said, both of which would be “able to host our partner the United States if they feel that it is convenient to send their navy as well.”

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UAE Ordered By UN Court To Protect Rights Of Qataris (Biddle, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Jo Biddle

The UN's top court Monday ordered the United Arab Emirates to protect the rights of Qatari citizens, wading into a bitter year-long crisis triggered when Gulf countries snapped ties with Doha.

Judges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague narrowly ruled in a provisional but binding decision that the UAE must allow families which include Qatari members, to be reunited, and that Qatari students must be given the chance to complete their education in the Emirates.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and other allies severed ties with Qatar on June 7, 2017, accusing Doha of backing terrorism. Qatari nationals living in the UAE were officially given just 14 days to leave the country.

But Doha denies the accusations, and last month appealed to the ICJ to impose emergency measures against the UAE to protect its citizens. It has also accused Abu Dhabi of breaking the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

In a hearing in late June, Qatar alleged that the United Arab Emirates was spreading a "climate of fear" among Qataris living there, splitting families and causing "substantial pain" during the year-long blockade.

On Monday, the court's judges found in Doha's favour, ruling the measures imposed by the UAE risked causing "irreparable harm" to Qatari citizens.

– 'Repairing the damage' –

The judges voted by eight votes in favour of a series of provisional measures – with seven judges against – that the UAE "must ensure that families, that include a Qatari, separated by the measures adopted by the United Arab Emirates ... are reunited," said presiding judge Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf.

Qatari students must also be allowed "to complete their education" in the Emirates or obtain their educational records if they wish to study elsewhere. Qataris "affected" by the UAE measures must also be allowed "access to tribunals and other judicial organs" in the country.

Qatar welcomed Monday's ruling, with foreign ministry spokesman Ahmed bin Saeed al-Rumaihi saying in a tweet that his country "was not seeking to escalate the dispute with the Emirates, but to repair the prejudice imposed on its citizens".

The move into the international courts came a year after the severing of ties and the imposition of punitive measures by Gulf countries accusing Doha of backing terrorism.

Other measures included banning Qatar Airways from their airspace and closing the country's only land border, with Saudi Arabia.

The UAE had insisted the ICJ had no authority to hear Qatar's case and stressed the situation for Qataris living in the country today is different from a year ago.

In a statement, the UAE highlighted that the court's decision involved only "provisional measures" and that "the court indicated certain measures with which the UAE is already in compliance".

"Instead of these unproductive manoeuvres, Qatar should be engaging with the legitimate concerns of the UAE and the other three states that have ended relations with Qatar regarding its continuing support for terrorism and its efforts to destabilise the region," it added in a statement quoted by the Emirates WAM news agency.

– 'Destabilising the region' –

In a separate twist, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates earlier this month also turned to the ICJ, asking that it quash a decision in Qatar's favour, handed down by the UN's global civil aviation body.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) ruled in late June that it had the jurisdiction to determine a dispute brought by Qatar, accusing its neighbours of violating an agreement that regulates the free passage of passenger planes through foreign airspace.

But Qatar's three neighbours want the ICJ, set up in 1946 to rule in disputes against states, to nullify the ICAO's ruling, saying its decision was "manifestly flawed and in violation of fundamental principles of due process and the right to be heard".

Diplomatic efforts have so far proved powerless to resolve the crisis which has rendered the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council practically obsolete.

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Court Orders U.A.E. To Let Expelled Qataris Back In (Walsh, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Declan Walsh

The top United Nations court intervened Monday in the bitter political feud dividing the Persian Gulf, ordering the United

Arab Emirates to allow the return of Qatari citizens expelled from the country last year.

The provisional order by the International Court of Justice, which is based in The Hague, is expected to have limited concrete effect. The court has no powers of enforcement and the United Arab Emirates, in response to the verdict, insisted it was already in compliance with it.

But the decision, by the most prominent international body to rule on the dispute, struck a symbolic blow to the punishing trade and diplomatic embargo that the United Arab Emirates and its allies — Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain — have been pressing against Qatar for the past year in an effort to isolate the tiny and fabulously wealthy nation.

"This sends an early, strong signal that there will be no tolerance shown to countries that take arbitrary measures against Qataris," Lulwa al-Khater, a spokeswoman for Qatar's foreign ministry, said in comments published by Qatar's state media.

The ruling may have its biggest impact in the battle for influence in Western capitals and international bodies, where Qatar and its foes have spent tens of millions of dollars in the past year on conferences, lawyers, news media advertisements and Washington lobbyists.

The court order "marks another blow to the blockade, which has failed from the beginning to gain support from the international community," said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Qatar's foes initially enjoyed loud support from President Trump, who appeared to side with their accusations that Qatar was financing Islamist terrorist groups and was secretly in league with Iran. Qatar denied the charges, saying it was being targeted for its outspoken TV network, Al Jazeera.

American officials pointed out that Qatar was home to a major American military air base, and Mr. Trump later backed off. In April he welcomed Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to the White House, where Mr. Trump hailed him as a "great friend."

In the complaint filed to the International Court of Justice last month, Qatar argued that the United Arab Emirates breached an international convention on racism when it expelled thousands of Qatari citizens in the opening weeks of the embargo in June 2017.

Under the ruling issued Monday, the United Arab Emirates must allow families with a Qatari member that were separated to be reunited, and Qatari students who were expelled must be allowed to resume classes or obtain records to continue

elsewhere. A third order stipulated that Qataris should be allowed to seek legal redress in the United Arab Emirates.

The orders do not constitute a final ruling, and it could be years before the full case is heard and decided.

The United Arab Emirates minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, attempted to put a positive spin on the decision, saying in a Twitter post that the judges had refused six other Qatari demands.

Mr. Gargash said his government had already met the "conditions required" by the court ruling.

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EUROPE & EURASIA

Jon Huntsman Slaps Back At Suggestion That He Resign As U.S. Ambassador To Russia (Harper, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Jennifer Harper

Robert Gehrke, a Salt Lake City Tribune columnist, recently suggested that U.S. Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman resign his post.

"Ambassador Huntsman, you work for a pawn, not a president. It's time to come home," Mr. Gehrke wrote in the wake of President Trump's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin last week.

Mr. Huntsman — former governor of Utah and a presidential hopeful — replied Sunday to this suggestion in a letter to the very same newspaper.

"As America's envoy to Russia, I am appointed by the president but confirmed by the Senate. I am charged with representing our country's interests, which in the case of Russia are complex and often little understood. Popular punditry is ill-suited to describing the acts of courage, dedication and patriotism I regularly witness as chief of Mission overseeing one of America's most sensitive overseas outposts," wrote Mr. Huntsman, a former U.S. ambassador to both Singapore and China who served in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush administrations — and who speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese.

"I have taken an unscientific survey among my colleagues, whom you reference, about whether I should resign. The laughter told me everything I needed to know," Mr. Huntsman observed.

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Former Ambassador Aims To Stop Russian Effort To Question Americans – Including Himself (Hayes, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By Christal Hayes

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia is visiting the nation's capital in hopes of stopping any effort by Russians to interrogate Americans, including himself.

Michael McFaul was one of about a dozen Americans that Russians want to question in exchange for the questioning of targets of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

The White House, at first, said it was considering the proposal that was raised during a meeting between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. It later put out a statement that shot down the idea.

McFaul said Monday on Twitter that he was heading to Washington and said while he believes there is a "low probability" that the Russian government would be able to get its hands on him, his hope is to make it "a zero probability event."

He said he plans to meet with "several US government officials to urge them to communicate with their Russian counterparts about the negative consequences of further harassing former US officials like me."

A White House official told USA TODAY that McFaul requested a meeting with the National Security Council and that "it was accepted out of courtesy."

The Washington Post reported McFaul will meet at the White House with Fiona Hill, a senior director on the National Security Council, who serves as Trump's top adviser on Russia.

Russia's interest in McFaul stems from his time as ambassador, a time when ties between the two countries deteriorated after the Obama administration attempted to "reset" the relationship.

He wrote a book on his tenure in Moscow and his contentious relationship with Putin, including when Obama signed into law the Magnitsky Act, named after Sergei Magnitsky, a tax accountant who died in prison after calling out fraud by Russian officials. The Magnitsky Act, which McFaul supported, imposed stiff sanctions on Moscow.

McFaul's book, "From Cold War to Hot Peace," details Kremlin attempts to discredit and harass him, with tactics that included dispatching protesters to his front gates and criticizing him on state media.

McFaul was named a "person of interest" by Russian prosecutors in their case against Bill Browder, an American citizen and associate of Magnitsky who had pushed for the passage of the law slapping sanctions on Russia.

Browder called the Russian investigation targeting him and others as a "crazy scheme."

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Donald Trump Says He 'Gave Up Nothing' In Putin Summit But Offers No Specifics On Talks (Jackson, USAT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

USA Today

By David Jackson

A week after his meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin stirred bipartisan criticism at home, President Donald Trump on Monday defended his handling of the summit but he offered no details on what was said in the private, two-hour meeting between the two leaders in Helsinki.

"When you hear the Fake News talking negatively about my meeting with President Putin, and all that I gave up, remember, I gave up NOTHING," Trump said wrote on Twitter. "We merely talked about future benefits for both countries. Also, we got along very well, which is a good thing, except for the Corrupt Media!"

Trump has been criticized by both Republican and Democratic lawmakers for his joint news conference with Putin in Helsinki in which he declined to challenge the Russian president on issues such as Moscow's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

At the news conference following the private meeting, Trump also appeared to accept Putin's denials of trying to undermine the U.S. election, even though U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia did intervene.

Trump has defended his meeting with Putin by saying he wants to work with Russia on issues like counter-terrorism, North Korea, Syria, and Ukraine, and he has invited Putin to visit Washington sometime in the fall, another source of anxiety for lawmakers.

Rep. Trey Gowdy, R-S.C., chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform, said the evidence proves that Russia "is not our friend and they tried to attack us in 2016," and Trump needs to be more forthright about it.

"The disconnect cannot continue," Gowdy said on Fox News Sunday. "The evidence is overwhelming and the president needs to say that and act like it."

U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller is probing whether Trump or anyone from his campaign coordinated with Russia in its attempt to tilt the 2016 election toward the Republican. Trump has denied any collusion and has repeatedly called the Mueller probe a "hoax" and a "witch hunt."

While defending the Putin meeting, Trump again called for ending the Mueller probe. Over the weekend, Trump zeroed in on release of a foreign intelligence search warrant regarding campaign aide Carter Page, claiming it is evidence that the Barack Obama administration "spied" on his campaign using information from a politically motivated "dossier" of information about Trump and the Russians.

That "Fake Dirty Dossier" is "responsible for starting the totally conflicted and discredited Mueller Witch Hunt!" Trump said in one tweet on Monday.

Legal analysts noted that intelligence agents had good reason to suspect Page had a relationship with Russia, and that the FBI found much of the dossier to be credible; they noted that four judges, all appointed by Republicans, signed off on the Page warrant and that Mueller recently obtained indictments on a dozen Russian intelligence officials on charges of election sabotage.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said on ABC's This Week that "there's no ignoring the fact that for whatever reason, this president acts like he's compromised."

There's no other way "to explain why he would side with this Kremlin former KGB officer rather than his own intelligence agencies," Schiff said.

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Trump: 'I Gave Up Nothing' To Russia (Muñoz, WT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Washington Times

By Gabriella Muñoz

President Trump doubled down Monday on his defenses over Helsinki criticism, denying that he conceded anything to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The president accused the "corrupt" media of misrepresenting the relationship between the two leaders.

When you hear the Fake News talking negatively about my meeting with President Putin, and all that I gave up, remember, I gave up NOTHING, we merely talked about future benefits for both countries. Also, we got along very well, which is a good thing, except for the Corrupt Media! — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 23, 2018

Mr. Trump has repeatedly used this argument since backlash began to grow over his joint press conference with Mr. Putin last week.

Critics from both political parties have denounced the president's comments.

Some prominent Democrats, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, suggested that the Russians may be manipulating the president by holding damaging information over his head.

Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee attempted, but were ultimately voted down by Republicans, to subpoena Mr. Trump's translator, who was the only other member of the U.S. delegation in the private meeting between the two leaders.

Reps. Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell argued the subpoena was necessary to determine what the president said to Mr. Putin, including any concessions or agreements he may have made.

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Russia Detains 6 Prison Guards Over Torture Video (Malpas, AFP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

AFP

By Anna Malpas

Russian investigators said Monday they had detained six prison guards over a video showing officers brutally beating an inmate which was leaked to an independent newspaper.

The group of prison service employees, "acting deliberately, clearly exceeding their official powers, used violence against a prisoner," investigators said.

Human rights activists regularly report torture, humiliation and beatings in Russian prisons, but the leak of such an explicit video is rare.

The branch of the Investigative Committee for the Volga city of Yaroslavl, where the video was shot at a penal colony, said "today six people have already been detained."

"The criminals delivered multiple blows with hands, feet and unidentified objects to the man's torso and limbs," it said in a statement.

The 10-minute video posted by the Novaya Gazeta newspaper on Friday shows a group of 18 uniformed men methodically beating a man who is pinned down on a table as he groans and pleads for mercy. They also pour water on his head.

The prisoner, named as Yevgeny Makarov, was left covered with bruises and cuts on his legs which were swollen and

infected, his lawyer wrote in a report quoted in the newspaper.

Makarov said he lost consciousness several times.

The video clearly shows the men's faces. Novaya Gazeta reported that it was shot in June 2017 but criminal action was only launched after the publication of the video.

Investigators said they had identified all those involved and were going through legal procedures to detain the rest of the participants.

They said that they would also look at the actions of the prison governor and top regional prison officials.

The video was shot with a portable video recorder that according to the law prison officers are obliged to carry.

The prisoner is still in jail but has been visited by a rights ombudsman and is relatively safe in a one-man cell, his lawyer Irina Biryukova told the Russian channel TV Rain.

– Threats from guards –

Rights group Public Verdict, which passed the video to Novaya Gazeta, said Monday that Biryukova has fled Russia after receiving threats and had asked for state protection for family members.

Biryukova told TV Rain that a reliable source in the region had informed her that prison guards had voiced personal threats against her.

"For my safety, we decided that it was necessary for me to leave Russia for the meantime," she said.

Amnesty International called on Russian authorities to "act immediately" to protect the lawyer.

"The launch of the investigation into the allegations of torture is a welcome first step towards justice," the rights group said in a statement.

"However, in the absence of a national mechanism which systematically works to prevent torture, the criminal case against Makarov's torturers will be an exception to the rule."

Biryukova said she was hopeful that the publicity around the case would lead to more arrests and eventual sentences, and that she would return to Russia soon.

The regional Investigative Committee told TASS state news agency it was checking into threats against Biryukova and could launch criminal action.

The case is not the first allegation of brutality against prisoners to emerge from the Yaroslavl colony.

Last year, Novaya Gazeta reported an inmate who was sentenced for taking part in protests against the return of

Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in 2012 was tortured there in a punishment cell.

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Ukraine Teens Pen Plays To Bridge War Divide (Gorshkov, AFP)

Tuesday, July 24, 2018

AFP

By Dmytro Gorshkov

A boy flees his war-scarred hometown, leaving his mother behind. A gay youth struggles for acceptance from his parents. A gang harasses a young black footballer.

These and other dramas took centre stage in a show in Kiev this month, which brought together teenagers from the east and west of Ukraine to write plays.

"It is moving," said 15-year-old Filip Kazlauskas, who wrote one of the pieces, a rock opera entitled "Romeo from Avdiivka".

"I wanted to achieve the effect of making audiences sad and making them burst into tears."

The play is named after the teenager's eastern hometown, which lies on the frontline of the conflict dividing the country.

Performed by professional actors, it won a standing ovation from the audience.

But the event was really about the young playwrights – in a bid to bridge the cultural divide in the war-scarred country.

"This project positively affects the future... it establishes a dialogue between the east and west" of Ukraine, one of the organisers, Natalya Vorozhbyt, told AFP as spectators filed into the auditorium in Kiev city centre.

"When young playwrights from different parts of the country meet and find common themes, then dialogue emerges, and an understanding that they have much in common."

– Backdrop of war –

The "Class Act" theatre project was born three decades ago in Scotland and has migrated to various countries. It first came to Ukraine in 2016.

Twenty pupils aged 14 to 16 came to Kiev from Avdiivka, a government-controlled eastern town, and from the western town of Chop.

The 10 short plays they devised were produced by professional directors and staged back-to-back.

"We worked very easily," Valentyn Yelizaryev, a 15-year-old from Chop, told AFP.

"I really liked it, I've learned a lot from being here."

In post-Soviet Ukraine, cultural differences persist between the Ukrainian-speaking west and the mainly Russian-speaking east.

A Moscow-backed insurgency broke out in two industrial eastern provinces in 2014 and has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

That is the backdrop for "Romeo from Avdiivka".

The government-controlled town of 20,000 inhabitants lies right on the frontline. It suffers near-daily armed clashes between Kiev forces and pro-Russian rebels.

"A son fled the country but his mother opted to stay there as the war rages," says Kazlauskas, the young playwright.

Like his protagonist, he himself got away from the war zone — if only for a week of rehearsals and a one-off performance with the "Class Act" professionals.

"The very fact that these children are going to Kiev, that they are studying under the influence of playwrights... gives us hope that a new intellectual generation can grow up," said one of the actors involved, Oleksiy Vertynskyi.

"If it helps even half of them decide on their future, that would be great."

— Jailed filmmaker's blessing —

The project won praise from one of the most prominent artistic figures caught up in the conflict, Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov.

He wished the teenagers good luck in a letter published online by a friend.

Sentsov, who is being held in a remote Russian prison, has been on hunger strike for more than two months after being jailed for alleged terrorism in Russian-annexed Crimea.

But he insists he is a political prisoner.

At the end of the show in Kiev, everyone who had been involved in the performances went onstage and held up signs saying #FreeSentsov.

Despite the regional and cultural divide, the participants are "so similar in our differences", Pavlo Arie, one of the project's directors, told AFP.

"Young people get the belief that they are worth something and that they can do something beautiful."

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Fewer Migrants Are Making It To Europe. Here's Why (WP)
Monday, July 23, 2018
Washington Post

Migration patterns in the central Mediterranean have hit a chaotic point of flux, with fewer migrants successfully making it to Europe.

Until recently, the primary path taken by migrants to Europe looked something like this: Traffickers launched migrants from the Libyan coast. When the flimsy boats ran into trouble — and they inevitably did — the migrants were typically rescued by humanitarian groups or by European Union or Italian patrol boats. Then, with scant debate, they were taken to Italy. The route had plenty of dangers — the central Mediterranean has long been the deadliest area on the planet for migrants. And sometimes the journey was thwarted by Libya's coast guard. But the vast majority who started from Libya made it to Europe. Between 2015 and 2017, according to United Nations data analyzed by The Washington Post, about 95 percent of migrants taking the so-called central Mediterranean route ended up on this continent's shores.

Last month, however, the success rate was 45 percent — the lowest of any month in at least four years. A large proportion of migrants were intercepted and returned to North Africa. But deaths have spiked. According to the International Organization for Migration, 564 people died in June — or more than 7 percent of those who attempted the crossing. That is the highest percentage in any month since at least 2015. For the year, 3.4 percent have died attempting the journey, compared with 2.1 percent last year.

Some experts say migration to Europe is transforming at a pace unseen since early 2016, when the European Union struck a deal with Turkey with the hopes of closing off the flow of asylum seekers to Greece. So what's behind the recent shifts?

It's become harder to evade the Libyan coast guard

Many migrants don't make it to Europe because they don't make it past the fleet of Libyan patrol vessels. The coast guard, rebuilt with E.U. and Italian funding, has become the most important player in the Mediterranean. Though the unit has been patrolling its coastal waters for more than a year and a half, data suggests it is becoming far more proficient at its job: intercepting migrants, placing them in detention on Libyan shores and keeping them from Europe.

In 2017, the Libyan coast guard managed to catch about 1 in 9 migrants attempting the journey. This year, it is intercepting almost 2 in 5. In June, it intercepted 47 percent.

The European strategy of using Libyan patrols as a first of defense is controversial. Migrants returned to Libya have faced brutal extortion and even torture. Humanitarian groups have accused the Libyans of behaving recklessly during rescues.

But the E.U. has doubled down. After a June migration summit, the bloc's leaders said that they would "step up" their support of the Libyan coast guard and that other vessels in the Mediterranean should "not obstruct" its operations. The leaders also proposed the creation of remote processing centers, probably in Africa, where migrants could be screened for asylum eligibility.

Libya's cooperation is a key reason migration to this continent has fallen so precipitously from its peak in 2015, a year when more than a million refugees and asylum seekers reached Europe by sea. So far this year, the number of sea arrivals is at 52,000.

Italy has refused to be the default destination for rescued migrants

Despite Europe's willingness to outsource patrols, Libya doesn't meet international maritime standards for safe ports. And so other vessels — humanitarian, commercial or from the Italian coast guard — that pick up migrants in distress are obligated to take them elsewhere. Usually, that has been Italy. But since a populist government came to power two months ago, Italy has resisted.

Saying that his country would no longer support such a "huge weight" on its own, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini — leader of the far-right League party — announced in early June that he was closing ports to humanitarian rescue ships. He has temporarily held up European and Italian coast guard vessels, as well.

In several instances, Italy has forced ad hoc negotiations among European countries over where to send rescued migrants. Even when the negotiations end with a deal — in mid-July, a handful of countries divvied up 450 people rescued by a large fishing boat — human rights groups say the E.U. is endangering injured or weak migrants, keeping them adrift amid political standoffs.

"We have to get rid of the uncertainty and chaos around disembarkation," said Judith Sunderland, associate director for the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch.

Salvini recently suggested that Libya should be recategorized as a safe port — a change that would, in theory, allow European boats to return migrants to Libya. According to Italy's ANSA news service, Salvini said there is "underlying hypocrisy" in Europe when "you give money to the Libyans, you supply motor launches and you train the coast guard but then you deem Libya not a safe port."

Meanwhile, data suggests that a new pathway to Europe — in the western Mediterranean, not the central — is widening. It's unclear if the shift is a direct response by traffickers or

migrants to the chaos. But last month, Spain for the first time became the busiest European arrival spot for migrants coming by sea. And Morocco is coming to rival Libya as the busiest launching point for traffickers' boats. For those who leave from Morocco, the odds of reaching Europe are higher. In the first 2½ weeks of July, some 3,600 migrants arrived in Spain, nearly triple the amount that arrived in Italy.

Fewer humanitarian rescue boats are patrolling

Experts caution that they aren't certain why there have been a greater number of deaths. Death figures can be volatile and can change from month to month based on particularly large accidents. But there weren't any mega-accidents in June.

One partial explanation could be that there are far fewer humanitarian rescue boats patrolling the area, after a spate of nongovernmental organizations stopped or paused their work, either for legal reasons or because of safety concerns after tense run-ins with Libyan patrollers. Only one NGO, Barcelona-based Proactiva Open Arms, has been operating in recent weeks. When Proactiva set off on its latest mission, Salvini said that the crew would only see Italy "in a postcard."

Analysts add that Libya might not yet have the manpower to fully patrol its own waters, adding to the dangers.

"It's not easy to say" why the death rate has increased, said Federico Fossi, with the U.N. refugee agency's Rome office. "Now there are very few NGOs. That has a big impact. There is a limited capacity in the Mediterranean."

He added, "It is a very rapidly changing environment. It's quite chaotic. The Libyan coast guard is not yet ready to be the only actor that is out there."

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Soccer Star's Resignation Deepens Germany's Immigration Debate (Pancevski, WSJ)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Wall Street Journal

By Bojan Pancevski

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

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Mesut Ozil's Exit From German Soccer Team Stokes Debate On Integration (Schuetze, NYT)

Monday, July 23, 2018

New York Times

By Christopher F. Schuetze

Germany awoke to a national debate on integration, racism and sports on Monday, as the news hit that one of its most

celebrated soccer players was quitting the national team, saying that he was the victim of bigotry and hypocrisy.

Mesut Ozil, a star of Germany's world champion 2014 team, announced his resignation in a series of lengthy social media posts, after enduring weeks of criticism for posing for a picture with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, and for his performance in Germany's shocking early exit from this year's World Cup.

"I'm a German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose," wrote Mr. Ozil, who was born in Germany to parents who had immigrated from Turkey.

Mr. Ozil, 29, has been a symbol of modern German soccer and, by extension, a modern, diverse Germany — an attacking midfielder who has been voted player of the year five times by German fans and has played on the national team for nearly a decade. His sudden departure from the national team raised long-simmering questions about ethnic identity in Germany, and the intersection of sports and politics.

"It is cause for alarm when a great German footballer like Mesut Ozil no longer feels wanted in his country because of racism and feels unrepresented by the DFB," the federal justice minister, Katarina Barley, wrote on Twitter shortly after the decision was published on Sunday, referring to the German acronym of the German Football Association.

The sports journalist Martin Schneider wrote in the influential Süddeutsche Zeitung daily that, more than the squad's early exit from the tournament, "the end of Mesut Ozil in the German national team is the real defeat of the summer."

In May, Mr. Ozil and Ilkay Gundogan, another teammate with Turkish roots, posed with Mr. Erdogan, the autocratic ruler of Turkey who was campaigning for re-election.

That prompted some to question whether Mr. Ozil should be on the national team, and the picture was roundly criticized as partisan, in a country where major sports figures are expected to act like apolitical role models.

Then in June, Germany, the defending champion, endured the worst performance in its modern World Cup history — sent home from the tournament in Russia before 16 other teams advanced to the knockout round of play. The denunciation of Mr. Ozil by some fans, commentators and soccer officials escalated.

The team's general manager, Oliver Bierhoff, appeared to question Mr. Ozil's on-the-pitch performance, suggesting that he should have been left off the team. Reinhard Grindel, the head of the soccer association, publicly demanded that Mr. Ozil explain the Erdogan picture; Mr. Grindel, in turn, was accused of failing to protect Mr. Ozil from xenophobic attacks.

In his resignation statement on Sunday, Mr. Ozil wrote that his meeting with Mr. Erdogan was not political, but "was about me respecting the highest office" of Turkey.

A large part of his statement focused on his disagreement with Mr. Grindel, a former member of Parliament from Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right party.

Mr. Ozil referred to comments Mr. Grindel had made that dismissed multiculturalism in Germany as a lie.

Ulrike Demmer, a spokeswoman for Ms. Merkel, praised Mr. Ozil and said that soccer played a big role in integrating immigrants into Germany. She said the chancellor respected Mr. Ozil's decision to quit, and that others should likewise respect it.

But the deep divide between Mr. Ozil and much of Germany's football establishment was illustrated on Monday by Uli Hoeneß, the president of the FC Bayern Munich team, who accused the player of "hiding his poor performance behind this picture" with Mr. Erdogan.

France's multicultural national team did not prompt the same kind of debates about race and identity this year. It helped, of course, that the squad won the tournament, bringing home the World Cup 20 years after the country's first victory in 1998.

But comments from abroad did elicit reactions — most notably an exchange between the comedian Trevor Noah, the host of "The Daily Show," and Gérard Araud, the French ambassador in Washington.

Mr. Noah, a South Africa native who had proudly said after the victory that "Africa won the World Cup," was quickly rebuked by Mr. Araud, who wrote on Twitter and even in a formal letter that the "Daily Show" host had misunderstood France's cultural model.

Turkish officials were quick to celebrate Mr. Ozil's decision to leave the German team. Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gülen wrote on Twitter that Mr. Ozil had "kicked his best goal against the virus of fascism, by leaving German national team."

A former president of the German soccer association, Theo Zwanziger, called the resignation "a major setback for integration efforts beyond football in our country," and said that the episode risked sending a message that people of immigrant backgrounds were "second-class Germans."

Mr. Ozil's statement about the infamous picture reached a big audience — he has 23 million Twitter followers, more than any of his former teammates, and heavy news coverage drew many other people to his broadside.

Mr. Ozil, who is under contract with Arsenal F.C. in Britain until 2021, wrote his message in English, ensuring a wide readership outside Germany.

Intentional or not, Mr. Ozil's words on social media echoed those of another German who was forced to deal with a dual identity.

In 1922, Albert Einstein said in a speech in Paris: "If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare that I am a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German and Germany will declare that I am a Jew."

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Anti-Nuke Protesters Break Into Joint German-US Air Base (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The German military said seven protesters were detained Monday after cutting through a fence surrounding an air base believed to hold U.S. nuclear weapons.

Germany's dpa news agency reported that the intruders were stopped by guards after entering the security zone at Buechel Air Base, in the country's west. The base is operated by the German Luftwaffe but the U.S. Air Force's 702nd Munitions Support Squadron is also stationed there.

According to dpa, those arrested were anti-nuclear activists belonging to a variety of Christian denominations. They were released shortly after being detained and now face criminal complaints for property damage, breaking and entering, and dangerous interference with air traffic.

It's the second time in less than 10 days that anti-nuclear activists have broken into the base.

A legal complaint from a local resident over the storage of nuclear weapons at the base was rejected by Germany's top court earlier this year.

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German Industry Group Says EU Mustn't Be Blackmailed By US (AP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Associated Press

The head of an influential German industry organization is calling on the U.S. and the European Union to put an end to

the escalating trade dispute between the two economic superpowers.

Dieter Kempf of the Federation of German Industries said Monday that "Europe mustn't allow itself to be blackmailed and should act with confidence" when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker visits Washington on Wednesday.

Kempf called on U.S. President Donald Trump to "scale down the rhetoric" and abolish tariffs that he said were imposed "under the cover of national security."

He noted that German automakers alone employ 180,000 people in the U.S. and 60 percent of the cars they produce are made for export.

Kempf called for talks on resolving trade disputes to take place at the World Trade Organization.

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May Tells U.K.'s Leave-Voting Heartlands They Need A Soft Brexit (Ross, Shankleman, Morales, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Tim Ross, Jess Shankleman And Alex Morales

Theresa May traveled to Britain's pro-Brexit industrial heartland to sell her plan to keep close ties to the European Union, as she battles to win support for her blueprint for future trade with the bloc.

The prime minister said supply chains for carmakers based in the region – including the major Nissan plant in Sunderland – depend on "frictionless" trade with the EU's single market, and that means sticking closely to its rules.

"This is a complex issue and the question people were asked was a simple one – leave or remain," May told an audience at Reece Group, an engineering firm in Newcastle, on Monday. "But behind that, in terms of the negotiations, are whole layers of complexity in terms of the future relationship."

May has faced a backlash from hardline Brexit campaigners inside and outside her government since publishing a 98-page prospectus for the U.K.'s future trade terms with the EU on July 12. She detailed plans for a new free-trade area, in which British companies would comply with European market regulations for manufactured goods and agricultural and food products.

But Brexit campaigners say she's betraying their vision of a clean break with the bloc. Two pro-Brexit ministers – Boris Johnson and David Davis – quit May's Cabinet in protest at her plans to keep close to the EU and adopt a so-called "common rule book" for trade in goods.

Short on Time

Time is running short for May to get a deal with the bloc on the terms of the divorce at October's summit of EU leaders. The U.K. is scheduled to leave the EU on March 29 – with or without an agreement.

Even if she persuades her Cabinet and Parliament to back the plan, May still needs to get a deal agreed with the EU. She insisted European officials had made "constructive responses" so far. "I won't say that you won't hear some negative things being said," the premier added.

It was a rare unscripted appearance from May, whose mechanical performances on the campaign trail last year earned her the nickname "the Maybot." Her decision to gamble on an early general election ultimately backfired.

On Monday, the prime minister was asked how she managed to relax doing such a stressful job. "I enjoy cooking, which has a benefit because you get to eat it as well as make it," she said.

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U.K. Labour's Antisemitism Rift Heads For September Showdown (Penny, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Thomas Penny

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the U.K.'s opposition Labour Party, will face a ballot called by his own lawmakers in September over the way the party tackles antisemitism in its ranks.

Labour members of Parliament triggered a vote at a meeting on Monday night over the definition of racism against Jews that Labour uses for disciplining party members. They want to adopt in full the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition used by organizations and governments worldwide.

Corbyn has been under pressure since becoming party leader in 2015 over his response to antisemitism in the party and the failure to promptly discipline members for racism against Jews. He faced an unprecedented demonstration by Jewish groups outside Parliament earlier this year after he was found to have defended an antisemitic mural and was accused of turning a blind eye to racist language used by party members in their criticism of Israel.

Former minister Margaret Hodge, a secular Jew, is facing disciplinary action from the party for "abusive conduct" after confronting Corbyn over the issue last week. She attended Monday evening's meeting at which it was agreed to hold a ballot of lawmakers when Parliament returns from its summer break in September.

Definition, Omissions

"The kick in the teeth to the Jewish community from not adopting the code is overwhelming," Hodge said after the meeting. "It's very gloomy. I don't understand why he can't just adopt it. If they don't think there's enough room to be critical, they can clarify and add to the code."

The latest row was sparked when Labour's ruling National Executive Council agreed a code of conduct that omits four examples of antisemitism used by the IHRA in its full definition, though the party says they are covered by other parts of its rules.

The four omitted examples refer to accusing Jewish people of being loyal to Israel ahead of their own country, claiming Israel is a racist state, setting higher standards of behavior for Israel than other states and comparing the Israeli government to the Nazis.

"Anti-semitism is a poison that must be challenged wherever it raises its head, across Europe and at home," Corbyn wrote in an article for the Evening Standard newspaper earlier this year. "Hatred and bigotry towards Jewish people has no place in our society, whether on the streets or online. And that of course goes for the Labour Party too."

After the ballot of lawmakers, the issue will go to the NEC where there will be a recorded vote at which campaigners hope the members who refuse to accept the whole IHRA definition will be exposed.

"This is what we wanted," lawmaker Louise Ellman said after the ballot was agreed. "I'm very moved by the strength of support, people spoke from the heart."

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Britain Experiences Worst Year For Living Standards Since 2012 (Atkinson, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Andrew Atkinson

U.K. living standards rose at their slowest pace since 2012 in the past year, with the post-crisis recovery in incomes going into reverse for the poorest 30 percent of families, according to the Resolution Foundation.

Typical disposable incomes after housing costs rose just 0.9 percent, held back by the pound-induced surge in inflation

following the 2016 Brexit referendum, the London-based think tank estimated in a report Tuesday. Poorer households were also victims of welfare cuts and saw their incomes decline by 0.3 percent.

The foundation estimated the loss to poorer families at as much as 150 pounds (\$200) a year as higher wages and lower taxes were not enough to offset cuts to tax credits and child benefit. Child poverty almost certainly rose last year, and the increase since 2010 has been underestimated in government data, it said.

"It is vital that government and other policy makers understand the positive impact that cash transfers have on low-income families, not least as they are in the middle of a huge multi-year program of over 14 billion pounds worth of benefit cuts," said Adam Corlett, senior economic analysts at the foundation. "The risk is that, unless the lessons of the past are learned, the future could spell squeezed incomes and further increases in child poverty."

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The Queen, The KGB Spy And The Prime Minister Who Wasn't Told (Hutton, BLOOM)

Monday, July 23, 2018

Bloomberg News

By Robert Hutton

Former U.K. Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home wasn't told that one of the Queen's aides had confessed to being a Soviet agent because his Home Secretary did not want to "add to his burden," according newly released files.

The revelation is contained in previously secret documents released on Tuesday at the National Archives in London. Other files deal with Margaret Thatcher's habit of falling asleep in cars and the way her office prepared for the election of her successor.

In 1964, after years under suspicion, Anthony Blunt, a former officer for the Security Service MI5, confessed that he passed documents to the KGB during the war. By this time he was a leading art historian, looking after Queen Elizabeth II's collection in his role as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures.

But the U.K. government was already reeling from the unmasking of the "Cambridge Spy Ring," a group who had been recruited by the Soviets while at university and had gone on to penetrate the highest levels of British intelligence. It didn't want to admit that it had found another member, so Blunt was offered immunity from prosecution – and protection from public exposure – in return for a full confession.

Palace Secret

The Palace was told about Blunt's treachery, but was asked to keep him in place so as not to arouse suspicion. Home Secretary Henry Brooke decided not to tell Douglas-Home. He may have wanted to avoid putting the prime minister in a position where he felt obliged to tell lawmakers from the opposition Labour Party about the scandal.

It wasn't until 1979 that Blunt was publicly named as a Soviet agent, when details of his role were published in a book. Thatcher confirmed it to Parliament, but her revelation that Douglas-Home had been unaware of the confession was greeted with astonishment.

'Well-Meant Effort'

After Thatcher's statement Brooke sent her a letter. "I have written to Alec to explain why in April 1964 I did not bring him in on what was happening about Blunt," he said. "And to say how sorry I am if in my well-meant effort not to add to his burden I may, with hindsight, have exercised my discretion wrongly."

Some of the files have a contemporary echo. Theresa May, trying to fend off anti-European attacks from Conservative lawmaker Jacob Rees-Mogg, won't be surprised to learn that Rees-Mogg's father, William, caused problems for one of her predecessors, John Major.

In 1993, Rees-Mogg senior went to court to try to stop Britain from ratifying the treaty that created the European Union. When he lost his case, Major was delighted. "Good," he wrote. "A full gloat is merited."

The files also show how both Conservative and Labour governments, concerned by the threat of communism, supported propaganda operations and urged MI5 to focus on suspected subversives in trades unions and the media.

In 1969, Labour Home Secretary James Callaghan, despite or perhaps because of his party's close links to organized labor, asked officials to look at ways that left-wing union leaders could be ousted, possibly by leaking stories to the press. A decade and a half later, Thatcher asked security officials to investigate whether left-wingers were trying to infiltrate the civil service.

Meanwhile, for three decades after the end of World War II, the British Foreign Office ran a secret propaganda section, the "Information Research Department," which aimed to provide information about the evils of communism abroad and at home and briefed selected journalists. The diplomats decided their best chance of being convincing was if their reports were trustworthy. The U.S. television journalist Edward Murrow was among those who admired the IRD's briefings.

Thatcher Naps

While Thatcher is famous for having got by on four hours of sleep a night, less well-known is her habit of catching up by napping on car journeys. It happened so often that her office asked for a specially designed headrest for her Daimler, to protect her neck if the car braked suddenly while she was dozing.

When Thatcher was finally ousted in 1990, her office began preparing for her successor. There were three candidates: Chancellor of the Exchequer John Major, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, and the man who brought Thatcher down, Michael Heseltine. A folder was prepared for each of them. Now public for the first time, they contain details of how the new prime minister should behave upon being invited to meet the Queen at Buckingham Palace, what government posts they would need to fill, and what urgent policy decisions they faced.

The first folder prepared was for Heseltine, a former Defence Secretary who had long been considered a likely successor to Thatcher. The Hurd and Major folders were then based on that, with variations reflecting their different situations. But Conservative lawmakers had different ideas from the officials: They went for Major as the compromise candidate.

And the Heseltine folder? It was filed away, a two-word scrawl at the top of the first page marking the end of his attempt to reach the summit of British politics: "Not needed."

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Satellite Pictures Show A Record Heat Wave Turning Britain From Green To Brown (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Washington Post](#)

You can't help but have noticed the lack of rain in many areas over the last 10-12 weeks. It's even changed the way the UK looks from space! pic.twitter.com/T4Cjm8GMH3— Met Office (@metoffice) July 18, 2018

For much of the year, Britain is wet and dreary, more mystery novel than sparkling beach read. Come summer, though, Britons can feel a bit smug. While Americans sweat and swelter, Brits enjoy warm days and sweater-weather nights.

At least that's usually the case. But not this year.

Britain is in the throes of the longest heat wave since 1976. Average summer temperatures usually hover around 78 degrees. In London, it stays slightly cooler, hitting the low 70s during the day and dropping into the 50s at night. This year, it's been nearly 10 degrees hotter, with spikes well into the 90s. It's been unusually dry, too — just two inches of rain have fallen between June 1 and July 16, making it the driest summer on record.

And experts say the heat will last at least through early August. The Heat Health Watch Service, run by the Met Office and Public Health England, has issued a warning, urging people to stay inside and drink plenty of fluids. Prime Minister Theresa May has urged people to stay out of the sun through Friday, when temperatures are expected to hit 93 degrees.

The weather has been so hot and dry that it has turned Britain from green to brown. Satellite images released by the Met Office, Britain's national weather service, show just how dramatically the weather has changed the country's topography.

Updated Satellite images of Ireland showing the forty shades of green turning to shades of brown as #Drought continues with no rain in many areas since the 20th of June. Images from 24th June, 3rd and 10th of July during #Heatwave pic.twitter.com/EVqg9UbfSf— Carlow Weather (@CarlowWeather) July 10, 2018

In addition to browned fields and crop damage, the warm, dry weather has been blamed for wildfires in northwestern England and a ban on sprinklers in Ireland.

There have been some unexpected upsides. The dry conditions exposed a "drowned village" in a reservoir in Dartmoor, Devon. The valley was flooded in 1898, experts say, submerging village walls, a farmhouse and a bridge. In Wales, researchers uncovered an early medieval cemetery and a prehistoric Roman farm. The Independent newspaper described it as a "gold rush" and "near-unprecedented bonanza" for archaeologists.

A report from Britain's Met Office suggests that climate change will make heat waves more frequent and severe.

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3-Year-Old Boy Deliberately Attacked With Acid In British Supermarket, Police Say (WP)

Monday, July 23, 2018

[Washington Post](#)

British authorities have struggled in recent years with a troubling rise in acid attacks that have left many victims blinded and disfigured.

Some have been part of gang violence. Some have been linked to broken relationships. And some defy easy explanation for their apparent randomness.

Officials now are trying to understand why a 3-year-old boy was splashed with a caustic substance Saturday in a discount store in the British town of Worcester. The toddler suffered severe burns on his arm and face. He has since been able to